



DIGITAL ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD

Indignant Reading

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
[Please share](#) how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

Citation	Goodman, Lesley Anne. 2013. Indignant Reading. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.
Accessed	April 17, 2018 4:11:42 PM EDT
Citable Link	http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:11051185
Terms of Use	This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA

(Article begins on next page)

Indignant Reading

A dissertation presented

by

Lesley Anne Goodman

to

The Department of English

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

English

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2013

© 2013 Lesley Goodman

All rights reserved

Indignant Reading

Abstract

In 1871, R. H. Hutton criticized George Eliot for “unfairly running down one of her own characters”: *Middlemarch*’s Rosamond Vincy. Hutton blamed Eliot for being cruel to her own creation and used his role as a reader and a critic to lodge a public complaint on Rosamond’s behalf. *Indignant Reading* identifies this response—dissatisfaction and even anger with an author for his/her perceived mistreatment of a fictional character—as a common occasion for literary criticism in the nineteenth century. The indignant readings found in Victorian reviews, letters, and prefaces advance conceptions of plot, characterization, and fictionality distinct from those offered in modern narratological criticism or historicist accounts of Victorian novel practice or literary criticism. Rather than abstracting the aesthetic and ethical concerns from the emotional terms common to Victorian criticism, I see these concerns emerging in conjunction with serious emotional demands and significant, if sometimes inchoate, beliefs about the “rights” of fictional characters.

In my discussion of indignation resulting from crimes of plot, I argue that insufficiently motivated events were interpreted by Victorian critics and readers as arising from the author rather than from the text. Discussions of crimes of characterization reveal an implicit tri-partite model of fictional character, in which authors might be incorrect about their own characters as well as cruel toward them. This manner of thinking about authorial accuracy and justice implies, I argue, a conception of fictionality that de-emphasizes the distinction between fiction and non-

fiction, modeling the author's relationship to his fiction on that of the historian to his text. This approach to fiction changes, however, in the twentieth century, alongside restrictive attitudes about the role of affect in performing literary criticism. While indignant reading re-enters the academy as one type of feminist criticism, which emphasizes the ethical at the expense of the affective, indignation in its most emotional form has become a primary mode of expression for fan communities.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	1
1 Poetic Injustice	31
2 Out of Character	58
3 Fictionality in the Nineteenth Century	102
4 Reading Indignantly After the Victorians	169
Bibliography	209

Acknowledgements

There was a time when I did not think it was possible to write a dissertation on a subject like “indignant reading.” This project only came about due to the continuing encouragement of Elaine Scarry, who believed in it from its beginnings as a response paper to *Jude the Obscure*. I owe endless thanks to Leah Price, the reason I attended Harvard and one of many reasons I am glad I did. Asking Amanda Claybaugh to be on my committee was one of the best decisions I have ever made, and her insight into my work has been invaluable; she always asks the right questions—those I fear and need the most.

My research at Harvard University has been supported by generous fellowships from the English Department as well as the Whiting Dissertation Completion fellowship. The dissertation could not have been written without the resources available through the Harvard University libraries and the assistance of Laura Farwell Blake and Gwen Urdang-Brown. I must also acknowledge the teachers and professors who guided me through high school and college: Anita Anderson, Mary Martin, and Susan Barrett from Richard Montgomery High School, and Betsy Bolton and Carolyn Lesjak from Swarthmore College.

I am also grateful to the graduate community in the English department at Harvard University. The British Literature Colloquium has guided my work on too many occasions to count. Thanks as well to the members of DRAG (the Dissertation Research Advisory Group): Nick Donofrio, Maggie Gram, Liz Maynes-Aminzade, and Jesse Raber. Kristen Roupenian has spent far too much time reading drafts and listening to me talk about my research, and for that, I will always be indebted to her. Thanks to my father, Fred Goodman, who never stopped encouraging me to read, and to my sister, Carly Goodman, who liked English first, and to Andrew Jacobs, for Keeland and more. And finally, I’d like to thank Lauren Ullrich, the most indignant reader I know.

Indignant Reading: An Introduction

There are two things almost everybody knows about the death of Little Nell.

The first is that crowds gathered at the docks in America, eagerly awaiting news of Little Nell's fate in the next installment of *The Old Curiosity Shop*; the second is Oscar Wilde's aphorism: "one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing."¹

Little Nell has been a problem for literary critics. Few twentieth-century critics seem to think either the character or her death is aesthetically admirable, and they seem to be mystified by the fact that people *used* to think either was good. As George Ford pointed out in 1955, "It is notable that we can read with pleasure what Dickens' contemporaries said of *David Copperfield*, but what they said of Little Nell fills us with astonishment or even a kind of embarrassment."² Within a period of one hundred years, Nell went from being compared to *King Lear's* Cordelia to becoming a source of shame to admirers of Dickens. For a long time, the question seemed to be: how can we excuse Dickens—and his readers—for Little Nell?

Scholars have attempted to explain what they perceived as the failure of Little Nell through psychological and biographical analysis, making much of the ways in which Dickens' own closeness to Nell, through her supposed real-life counterpart, Mary Hogarth, obstructed his artistic vision.³ They have read Nell as allegory, fairy tale, or fable.⁴ In 1959, Mark Spilka

¹ Violet Wyndham, *The Sphinx and Her Circle: A Biographical Sketch of Ada Leverson, 1862-1933* (London: Andre Deutsch, Limited, 1963), 119.

² George H. Ford, *Dickens and His Readers: Aspects of Novel-Criticism Since 1836* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 55.

³ Adriana LaPointe, "Little Nell Once More: Absent Fathers in *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 18 (1989): 19-38.

attempted to “isolate a defect in the author’s sensibility and to indicate... a similar defect in his nineteenth-century readers.”⁵ For Spilka, the changing tides of taste—one common explanation for the Little Nell phenomenon—are not sufficiently explanatory; he suggests instead that “the quality of Victorian sentiment seems neurotic... the lavish flow of tears, over Nell and her counterparts, was a form of cultural neurosis in the audience.” Writing in 1967, Lawrence Selenick also turns to “neurosis”: “This wholesale mourning for a fictional maiden strikes us as irrational; a genuine cathartic release is not astonishing, but we are baffled by the seeming inadequacy of the cause of catharsis.”⁶ F. R. Leavis similarly finds an inexplicable disjunction between Little Nell as depicted and the response: “to suggest taking Little Nell seriously would be absurd; there’s nothing there. She doesn’t derive from any perception of the real; she’s a contrived unreality.”⁷

More recent critics are less likely to insist that readers’ reactions, being aesthetically unmotivated, are thereby inexplicable. We are perhaps more comfortable with historical-aesthetic relativism; we can, as Ford suggested, “shift part of the responsibility from Dickens to the age itself.”⁸ Sentimentalism is no longer an accusation but, at least in part, an explanation. I am not convinced, however, that the strong reaction to Nell’s death is truly surprising or inexplicable; the history of aesthetic response is also the history of extreme emotional response.

I do not intend, in this introduction, to offer an analysis of Nell’s death or the reaction to it; that will have to wait until my first chapter. Instead, I am interested in what we talk about

⁴ Lawrence Selenick, “Little Nell and the Prurience of Sentimentality,” *Dickens Studies* 3 (1967): 146-159.

⁵ Mark Spilka, “Little Nell Revisited,” *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters* 45 (1960).

⁶ Selenick, 151.

⁷ F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 225.

⁸ Ford, 68.

when we talk about Little Nell. Critics tell the story of Little Nell, which is actually the story of American readers at the docks and Oscar Wilde sneering at them, for the same reasons we tell the story of the apocryphal readers of *Pamela* who rang wedding-bells to honor Pamela's marriage to Mr. B.⁹: they construct a reader we like to imagine as other. Wilde's quip, though meant to be shocking, secures us in our understanding of Victorian readers as the very definition of uncritical readers: lacking taste, reading only for the indulgence of emotions, unclear about the line between fiction and reality.¹⁰ Wilde sanctions our judgment.¹¹ The story of Little Nell is the story of uncritical readers and our distance from them.

Loralee MacPike and E. W. F. Tomlin have both pointed out that Little Nell criticism is a dialogue between two opposing parties: "a pattern emerges: the public loves Little Nell, the critics attack, and the public retires."¹² This is the same pattern produced in the beginning of most critical articles on Nell; it creates a narrative and constructs a reading public without exploring the complexities of the actual reading publics that received *The Old Curiosity Shop*. It reproduces the binary between critical and uncritical reading, a binary that not only obscures our continuing understanding of reading practices to this day but that is anachronistically applied to the Victorian period. Indeed, in 1997, Richard Walsh pointed out that responders to the death of

⁹ See Alan D. McKillop, "Wedding Bells for Pamela," *Philological Quarterly* 28 (1949): 323-325.

¹⁰ Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15.

¹¹ In fact, both anecdotes have somewhat dubious origins. Christopher Flynn describes the story of the Americans at the docks as "an anecdote without an event, a discursive history and nothing more," citing Elizabeth Brennan's failure to find any verifiable evidence. (Christopher Flynn, *Americans in British Literature 1770-1832: A Breed Apart* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008], 9). While Oscar Wilde's quip seems to be based in fact, it's worth noting that there is no evidence that Wilde actually read *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and indeed, Nell's death is not actually depicted (Hugh Dighman, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, January 23, 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/23/opinion/1-little-nell-rescued-from-oscar-wilde-075588.html>).

¹² Loralee MacPike, "The Old Curiosity Shop: Changing Views of Little Nell, Part II," *Dickens Studies Newsletter* 12 (1981), 70.

Little Nell were not just sad—they were angry, at Dickens in particular.¹³ To demonstrate this point, Walsh did not uncover long-lost letters or reviews; he cited many of the same reviews that critics have been citing for decades. Rather than grouping these angry responses with tearful responses under the umbrella of extreme emotions, Walsh notes that there are two attitudes that seem to be “unselfconsciously combined” by Dickens’ readers: sadness that a beloved character has died and anger that Dickens’ “narrative artistry” had failed to keep Nell alive.¹⁴

This dissertation places that anger at the center of Victorian reading practices, as part of a pattern of response that I call “indignant reading.” Readers become indignant when they feel that an author is being unfair or cruel to one of his/her characters. The response is directed *at* the author and *on behalf of* the fictional character; indignant readers hold the author responsible for a wrong committed against the character.

Indignant reading challenges many of the binaries that underlie our approach to fiction. Unlike many other emotional responses to fiction, some of which have been more thoroughly studied, indignation is a two-pronged response. Because indignation is both an emotion and an ethical response to a perceived injustice, it challenges the divisions that critics and readers so often make between emotional and rational responses to literary texts. Moreover, indignant response is directed at two levels of the reading experience usually considered to be distinct: the level of the author and the construction of the text, and the level of the character and the fictional representation. The apparent contradiction implied here—how can we be upset about the wrongs done to a fictional character when we know that the character has been created by an author?—both explains the critical neglect of indignant reading and justifies the extensive treatment I am

¹³ Richard Walsh, “Why We Wept for Little Nell: Character and Emotional Involvement,” *Narrative* 5, no. 3 (October 1997): 311.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

giving it here. Critics and scholars have often assumed that we cannot reasonably sustain such strong emotions toward the make-believe, that such a reaction must be aberrational and irrational. One of the conclusions that the very existence of indignant reading must lead us to is that reminders of a text's fictional or constructed status do not necessarily invalidate or limit readers' emotional engagement with that fiction.

In addition to being a complex literary judgment, indignant reading is a pattern of response with a history both public and private. Whatever their idiosyncrasies, indignant readers are participating in a particular form of literary discourse that became widespread in the nineteenth century, especially in Victorian periodical novel reviews, and that has continued to find expression throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Just as indignant reading suggests the compatibility of modes of reading usually opposed to one another, so too does the identification of indignant reading as a historical pattern of response allow us to see continuity between widely differing sets of readers—readers who differ in terms of historical period, nation, gender, class, values, and personality. I thus offer indignant reading as both a theoretical intervention in the study of reading and a historical phenomenon that can provide insight into the reading practices and aesthetic standards of Victorians.

Indignant Reading as a Theoretical Practice

Indignant readers and uncritical readers do two things that literary critics sometimes struggle to explain: they respond to texts with emotion, and they treat characters as if they are real people. Part of the difficulty in understanding these two reactions is that critics often consider them to be a single problem: since characters are *not* real, readers who emote toward them or in response to them are engaging in delusion. Indeed, one source of perplexity for

literary critics in the response to Little Nell was that the depiction of Nell did not seem to meet our standards for realistic characterization. Nell was obviously fictional, as Leavis noted: “She doesn’t derive from any perception of the real; she’s a contrived unreality.”¹⁵ Therefore, the logic goes, “to suggest taking Little Nell seriously would be absurd.” Rather than conclude that Little Nell’s mourners were absurd, however, we might challenge the idea that a “contrived unreality” is antithetical to “taking Little Nell seriously.” In other words, what we might learn from Little Nell—and what we can learn from indignant reading—is that readerly emotion does not depend on believing that characters are real people, or at least that this belief is much more complex than we acknowledge.

“If my profession has a single rule,” contends Blakey Vermeule in *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*, “it is that the distinction [between a fictional character and a real person] needs to be honored.”¹⁶ Indeed, the history of character in literary criticism is the history of this prohibition, of the fall of mimetic criticism and the rise of textual criticism, as Alex Woloch points out.¹⁷ The mimetic approach tends to view fictional characters on the model of real people. Such strands of criticism include biographical criticism, psychological criticism, and theories of literature based on mimesis or verisimilitude. In contrast, the textual strain of criticism attempts to subordinate, deemphasize, or eliminate the referential or mimetic aspects of or perspective on character, in favor of analysis of the textual—formalist, structuralist, actantial, etc. This distinction is made into a binary by virtue of assumptions about readerly emotion; the

¹⁵ Leavis, 225.

¹⁶ Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), x.

¹⁷ Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 15.

two modes of character can be understood as mutually exclusive insofar as considering the textual aspects of character undoes the mimetic “illusion.”

The fall of mimetic criticism is usually said to begin with A. C. Bradley, who has long been the exemplar of the age of “character criticism,” an age in which literary critics, we are told, wrote and argued about characters as if they were real people. Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy* was originally published in 1904 and was made infamous by L. C. Knight’s “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” in 1933. Although Bradley never actually questioned the number of Lady Macbeth’s children, he did reflect on the psychology, temperament, and lives of Shakespeare’s characters inside and outside the boundaries of the text:

Let us first ask ourselves what we can gather from the play, immediately or by inference, concerning Hamlet as he was just before his father’s death. And I begin by observing that the text does not bear out the idea that he was one-sidedly reflective and indisposed to action. Nobody who knew him seems to have noticed this weakness. Nobody regards him as a mere scholar who has ‘never formed a resolution or executed a deed’. In a court which certainly would not much admire such a person he is the observed of all observers. Though he has been disappointed of the throne everyone shows him respect... If he was fond of acting, an aesthetic pursuit, he was equally fond of fencing, an athletic one: he practiced it assiduously even in his worst days. So far as we can conjecture from what we see of him in those bad days, he must normally have been charmingly frank, courteous and kindly to everyone, of whatever rank, whom he liked or respect, but by no means timid or deferential to others...¹⁸

This is a kind of character criticism performed often (though not always and not solely) by nineteenth-century critics—the kind that assumed, as L. C. Knights put it, that it is the primary business of writers, whether Shakespeare or contemporary novelists, to create characters and reveal knowledge of the human heart.¹⁹ Characters are made up of words, Knights emphasized,

¹⁸ A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, 4th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 78-79.

¹⁹ L. C. Knights, “How Many Children had Lady Macbeth? An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism” (Cambridge: Gordon Fraser, The Minority Press, 1933), 2.

inaugurating the basic division in theories of character between mimetic theories and textual theories, and he attributed the increase in character criticism (correlating to the growth of the popular novel, beginning with Scott, according to Knights) to a reluctance to master the words of a text; characters are much more manageable as human beings than they are as text.²⁰

Critics have generally taken up Knights' call to arms: in the early twentieth century, the discursive and semiotic aspects of character began to be emphasized, while the representational and humanist were neglected. Most of the twentieth-century schools of theory have rejected the way that nineteenth-century critics and many twentieth- and twenty-first century lay readers continue to think about characters—or at least, they have rejected the version of character criticism castigated by Knights. Formalist and structuralist schools of criticism have produced theories of character as functions or structures in a plot; the anthropomorphism of fictional characters was to be seen through and rejected. Vladimir Propp, A. J. Greimas, and Tzvetan Todorov produced actantial or functional models of character, in which characters are defined by their functions in the plot, and their names, appearance, personality, and so forth are of essentially no significance.²¹ As Woloch puts it, “characterization has been the *bête noire* of narratology, provoking either cursory dismissal, lingering uncertainty or vociferous argument.”²²

These theories, beginning in the early twentieth century but continuing to be elaborated throughout the century, were reinforced by critics rejecting the mimetic aspects of character for different reasons. Post-modernists, post-structuralists, deconstructionists, and their concomitant

²⁰ Knights, 25-26.

²¹ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Louis A Wagner, trans. Laurence Scott, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968). Propp's functions, based on his analysis of Russian folktales, include such characters as the hero, the villain, the helper (who helps the hero), and the donor (who provides some agent that ultimately assists the hero in his journey).

²² Woloch, 14.

theories, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, seemed to ring the death knell for fictional characters by challenging the concepts of the “self,” the “individual,” or the “human.” If the unified and coherent self is just an illusion, then the idea of a fictional character as a unified and coherent individual is even more problematic, an illusion that contributes to the ideology of the individual. Such schools also challenge the general referentiality of fiction, since there is nothing real outside the text. Everything is textual – especially texts. Even those scholars who did not necessarily accept the idea of a coherent self as false might accept the challenge to referentiality in general and the insistence on the textuality of characters, as of course formalists, structuralists, and narratologists did. Believing in the humanity of characters may be one of the ways readers consume literature, but this apparent humanity had to be sacrificed for the critical analysis of literature. At least, so it seemed for a long time.

While the character criticism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has certainly not been revived, recent cognitive and evolutionary approaches have taken on the issue of how and why we emote toward fictional characters. The question of emotions at, with, toward, or on behalf of characters is distinct from the question of what a character is, but nonetheless such works implicitly and explicitly offer some ideas toward the question. These studies of evolutionary psychology and cognitive science seek to understand readers’ relationships with fictional characters in terms of cognitive strategies and adaptability, usually concluding that in key ways characters are cognitive tools, practice figures for dealing with real human beings. Why do we care about literary characters, asks Vermeule:

The very short answer is gossip: we need to know what other people are like, not in the aggregate, but in the particular.... The reasons that we care about literary characters are finally not much different from the question of why we care about other people, especially people we have never met nor are ever likely to meet.²³

²³ Vermeule. xii-xiii.

Lisa Zunshine and William Flesch make similar kinds of arguments, in which cognitive tools for dealing with people are adapted to fictional characters, or in which fictional characters help readers practice their dealings with real people (or both). Fictional characters, then, aren't much different from human beings. Though this return to a mimetic approach to character comes from a very different intellectual and critical position from the character criticism of the nineteenth century, the de-emphasis on the textuality of fictional characters is actually more extensive than in the criticism of Bradley, who was, in his basic approach to fiction, a kind of formalist.

Cognitive and evolutionary critics return to mimesis because they are interested in reading; Vermeule's title is not, "What is a Literary Character," but rather, "Why Do We Care about Literary Characters." I suggest, however, that we should be skeptical about the equation of mimesis and emotion, and indignant reading offers one form of challenge to that equation. To be sure, indignant readers are very much invested in fictional characters as seeming at least in part like real people, and my analysis would go nowhere if I did not take such testimony seriously. But my approach also differs from the cognitive approach. Cognitive/evolutionary critics tend to argue that it is the humanity in fictional characters that causes readers to respond to them, but I emphasize, in contrast, that the purely fictional, the textual and artificial, aspects of character also play a crucial role in readers' responses. To approach characters primarily as "practice people" is to neglect those non-real aspects of characters that nonetheless determine readers' emotional engagement with them. It is one of my contentions in this dissertation that while readers can emote toward characters as if they are real people, these emotions are partially constituted by the specifically fictional and textual existence of characters. Readers may respond to injustice against characters with the same indignation that they might feel about a real injustice against real people, but the nature of the injustice against characters is entirely different.

Real people are not created by authors and so cannot be victimized by authors. Readers, then, can respond to characters because they are *not* like people, among other reasons. While there is much to be gained from acknowledging the similarities between fictional characters and real people, emphasizing *only* these similarities may lead to problems, as I describe in Chapter Three. The kinds of responses that fall under the category of indignant reading necessitate an awareness of a character's artificiality, fictionality, in addition to the experience of that character's "humanity." Mimetic accounts of character often suggest that the textual must be overlooked – that if mimesis is an illusion, it depends on the illusion of non-textuality. I view mimesis and textuality as crucially intertwined, rather than opposed.

In bringing together these two strands of character criticism, it is my aim that indignant reading will indicate the need for a divide between anxieties about character and anxieties about reading. I have suggested that some of this anxiety arises from the problems critics face when it comes to reading and emotion. There is, of course, an entire school of criticism devoted to the study of reading, but the trajectory of reader-response criticism has left a gap in reader theory. Indignant reading presents particular challenges to the study of the reader—but this also means it presents particular opportunities. Indignant reading as a form of response is, at first glance, uncritical (by which I mean emotional and apparently unreasoned, especially from a modern professional perspective),²⁴ negative or disapproving, and idiosyncratic. Each of these features requires critics to bridge the gap between actual readers and reading in the abstract, which reader criticism has often struggled to do. Turning to reading then, I suggest that indignant reading

²⁴ Warner, 15.

offers one attempt at a solution to a problem that has plagued the study of readers for a long time: the divide between the reader as an abstraction and actual, existent readers.

Since its inception as a defined critical movement in the 1970s, the field of reader-response criticism has been marked by a diversity of trends, in part because most reader-response theorists came from other critical positions, including formalism, narratology, psychoanalysis, structuralism, feminist criticism, historicism, and deconstruction. What initially unified the field was the rejection of W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's "The Affective Fallacy" (1954), which explicitly formulated the New Critical principle distinguishing the work itself from its effects on readers. Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that a text's effect on a reader should have no bearing on the analysis or interpretation of the text itself; criticism that relies on personal experiences, they argued, is unreliable and subjective.²⁵ Reader-response critics insisted in contrast that a text could not be fully understood independent of its effects on readers and that it had no meaning outside of its readers. Reader-response critics of all varieties are thus united in focusing their attention on readers, reading, and the process of making meaning or interpretation.

Nonetheless, what it means to study readers—not only the effects of texts on readers but the active process of making meaning—has been understood in a number of different ways. One of the major divisions in reader-response theory stems from how the reader is conceived: the reader as an abstract or hypothetical category, or the reader as an actual, existing or historical entity. Both positions have been part of reader-response theory since the 1970s, but the distinction between them is crucial to the development of reader theory; these two approaches to the reader rarely intersect.

²⁵ William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 1398.

Many of the founding documents of reader-response criticism were formalist and narratological in approach, both of which construct an abstract reader around whom to theorize. Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader* (1974) is an early and prominent example of the formalist approach; the implied reader is a textual formation essentially created by responding to the gaps and indeterminacies in literary texts. Stanley Fish, one of the most vocal proponents of reader-response theory, focuses on the mental procedures—anticipations, reversals, and retrospections—involved in reading even a few lines of a text. Fish also identified the concept of the “interpretive community,” which describes the set of interpretive conventions and values that readers in a community tend to share.²⁶ Critics who otherwise differ in their theory of the reader may be united in depending on an abstract reader; Georges Poulet, a phenomenological critic, also imagines an abstract and exemplary reader, but one who is passive, in contrast to Iser's and Fish's emphasis on the reader's role in making meaning.²⁷

Some approaches to reading seek to understand how authors attempt to position their readers, without venturing upon the territory of how actual readers respond to such positioning. In 1950, Walter Gibson introduced the concept of the “mock reader,” a role defined by the text and distinct from any actual reader.²⁸ Narrative theorists offered more sustained and complex approaches to thinking about readers in the abstract. In particular, rhetorical theories of narrative examine narrative as a communicative act. Gerald Prince's “narratee” (1973) is the hypothetical person to whom a narrator may address his/her narration, distinct from the actual reader just as

²⁶ Stanley Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” in *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 164-184.

²⁷ Georges Poulet, “The Phenomenology of Reading,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1320-1332.

²⁸ Walter Gibson, “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers,” in *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, 1-6.

the narrator is distinct from the actual author.²⁹ Similarly, Peter Rabinowitz, in “Truth in Fiction” (1977), distinguishes between the actual audience; the authorial audience (the author’s hypothetical audience, with the beliefs and knowledge the author ideally imagines his audience to have); and the narrative audience (the [fictional] narrator’s ideal audience, who believe that the fiction is real, that Anna Karenina exists, that magic exists, or whatever else might be required).³⁰ Actual audiences may join or not join these audiences. Such theories do, then, acknowledge the existence of actual readers distinct from hypothetical readers, though the emphasis of their work is on the hypothetical reader.

It belongs to other kinds of reader-response critics to say anything more about the practices of actual readers. Some early theorists, coming from a psychoanalytic approach, emphasized the mental and psychological experience of particular readers, as in David Bleich’s *Subjective Criticism* (1978) and Norman Holland’s *5 Readers Reading* (1975). Histories of reading, like Richard Altick’s *The English Common Reader* (1957), examine readers and reading practices in distinct historical places and times to understand the social and historical pressures that affected them, and how in turn these populations of readers affected the literary productions of the time.

Many of these studies lack the theoretical impact of their counterparts; they speak primarily to the readers they take as their subjects with limited implications for readers not explicitly covered. This is one reason why Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* is an important work—Radway used sociological methods to analyze the reading practices of groups

²⁹ Gerald Prince, “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee,” in *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, 7-25.

³⁰ Peter Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences,” *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (1977): 121-141.

of women who were regular readers of romance novels. Radway is able to use the details of the actual practices of living people, in a specific historical context, to challenge the way literary critics approach the readers of popular texts. Radway's work resisted one of the dominant ways of looking at readers, a metaphor that became a theory—the model of the passive consumer. Radway suggests that by constructing women readers as purely receptive consumers of the meanings embodied in the text, critics could conclude that romance readers were entirely powerless in the face of heterosexist patriarchal ideology. Scholars of the romance often attribute desires, wishes, beliefs, and emotions to romance readers based on their own readings of the romance—and the fact that Radway's own research showed that such attributions were false is evidence of some of the dangers of formalist reader-response theory. Instead, Radway suggested that we consider comprehension a “process of making meaning,” substantiating Michel de Certeau's claims in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that readers appropriate and re-appropriate meaning when reading texts.³¹ Radway's readers did not necessarily rebel or reject the ideology that earlier critics had identified in the text, but they did make other uses of the texts and consumed them on their own terms. Radway's work is important not only in what it teaches us about romance readers but in its model of reader-response theory; she is able to cross the divide between actual reader theory and abstract reader theory.

Reader-response theory has not been in vogue for several decades, in part because of the gap between studies of an over-generalized reader and studies of actual readers lacking sufficient theoretical impact. Nonetheless, not only do critics continue to study the reader, they continue to do so along the lines established by reader-response theory—the abstract reader and actual readers—despite rarely identifying their work as reader theory. Studies of the reader continue in

³¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 166.

the area of cognitive and evolutionary approaches to literature, where readers are generally treated as abstract entities, and book history, concerned above all the material practices involved in reading and writing.

The relatively recent field of cognitive literary studies, as I have suggested, considers the cognitive abilities and actions necessary for reading as well as their evolutionary usefulness, as in the work of Lisa Zunshine and William Flesch. Such works are often very similar to narratological accounts of readers and reading. Indeed, the field of “cognitive narratology” considers the relationship between principles of narrative (including the reading of narrative) and principles of cognitive functioning identified by the growing field of cognitive science—as, for instance, in the emphasis on “mind-reading,” the means by which we attribute mental states to the people around us, in the work of both Zunshine and Vermeule.

This set of subfields has brought new life to fundamental questions about literature, narrative, and especially reading—namely, why and how we do it. The underlying assumption of many such studies is that telling and reading (or hearing) stories must either serve some adaptive purpose or exist as a by-product of another adaptive function. One of the interesting consequences and contributions of such studies has been to take readers’ responses as the basis for inquiry, particularly readers’ emotional responses, and even the ostensibly pre-critical emotions that critics and teachers often teach their students *out of*.

But ways of reading do not emerge in historical vacuums. Scholars of book history, often coming from different fields, study the material practices of readers in their particular milieu and their relationships with other aspects of book production and circulation, as in Leah Price’s *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel* and William St. Clair’s *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Book history tends to distinguish itself from reader-response theory by rejecting the

phenomenological approach. As Roger Chartier puts it, the phenomenology of reading “erases the concrete modality of the act of reading and characterizes it by its effects, postulated as universals.”³² A history of modes of reading “must identify the specific dispositions that distinguish communities of readers and traditions of reading,”³³ as Radway’s study did. A book-historical approach refuses to cease inquiry at the production of the text by the author, emphasizing instead the materiality of the book and the mechanics of distribution. While the history of the book is a highly diverse field, Robert Darnton has offered a model for studying how books are produced and distributed, proposing a “communications circuit” that traces the book from production (author, publisher, and printer) to distribution (shipper and bookseller) to reception (the reader).³⁴ It is the field of reception that is of relevance to the study of the reader. Leah Price has critiqued the tradition of reception studies “that focuses on the content of readers’ opinions—whether on the psychology of experimental subjects’ ‘responses’ or on the history of the judgments through which a particular text has been ‘received’—to the exclusion of the form that those opinions take and the institutions that generated them in the first place.”³⁵ A book-historical study of the reader, then, must consider the content, the form, and the institutional matrix from which they both arise.

³² Roger Chartier, “Labourers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader,” in *The Book History Reader*, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (New York: Routledge, 2006), 88.

³³ Chartier, 88.

³⁴ Robert Darnton, “What is The History of Books?” in *The Book History Reader*, 10-11.

³⁵ Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

The reception field comprises both published and private responses.³⁶ More than many other approaches to the reader, book history analyzes the relationship between the two. While a Victorian reader's personal journal is produced under very different circumstances and with very different goals than public forms of reception, her language and commentary on a particular text may very well be shaped by the conventions of periodical criticism. Nancy Glazener points out that critics of book history have available to them two approaches to reception, which she describes as "a social undertaking practiced individually."³⁷ On the one hand, critics can study a single reader "as a positionality and a reflective consciousness, as a historical possibility fulfilled in a unique way" that makes meaning of a text or texts.³⁸ Critics can also consider the "collective activity" of readers, often through these published and public documents.³⁹ Glazener's own work on American realism, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910*, focuses on "public debates" and conversations about different aspects of fiction, many of which occurred as and through records of response to particular texts. Readers must be understood, then, as individuals but also as components of a larger institutional process of reception.

The different methodologies of the cognitive approach to readers and the book history approach means that they face different issues of evidence selection. The cognitive approach, like narrative theory, can suffer from a problem of selection bias. With less of a necessity for historical contextualization, some critics may choose to illustrate their claims with canonical

³⁶ Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker, "A New Model for the Study of the Book," in *The Book History Reader*, 58.

³⁷ Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U. S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 3.

³⁸ Glazener, 3.

³⁹ Glazener, 4.

works or critical darlings, a tendency of which few critics are entirely free. On the one hand, they may overemphasize those works that best illustrate, exemplify, or even complicate whatever topic they are interested in; on the other hand, they might treat the canon as a list of culturally representative works; and finally, they might also do both. Book-historical research has illuminated the differences between canonical literary history and the chronology of what people actually read (as in, for instance, William St. Clair's "The Political Economy of Reading"), and historians of the book are far more likely to consider the impact and response to works largely forgotten by the modern critic but meaningful to actual historical individuals: the minor, the no longer appreciated, the forgotten. The book historical approach allows us to distinguish between the relative insignificance of a particular text and the meaningfulness of some aspect of its reception.

Neither cognitive studies nor book history tends to identify as reader-response theory. There are legitimate reasons for this; neither field is uniquely focused on the reader, after all. But this also means that critics of either field rarely acknowledge one another as working in similar territory. What is needed is an analysis of reading using historicist objects and methodology but that can speak to the theoretical discussions being carried on by narratologists and cognitive/evolutionary critics, as well as historicist accounts of reading. My study of indignant reading aims to bring together the theoretical and historicist strands of reader-response theory.

As I have suggested, theoretical accounts of reading often imagine the ideal reader as a blank slate, though theorists like Rabinowitz make room in their theories for some aspects of what actual readers might be bringing to the reading experience. It is in this context that "uncritical responses" are typically studied, but this uncritical quality is usually equated with

passivity. The emotional responses that are examined by critics are usually reverie, fantasy, and identification, as in V. Nell's *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*.

As Michael Warner points out, however, "uncritical" reading describes not just sentiment, reverie, and self-forgetfulness; it is also "literalism," "distraction," frustration, anger.⁴⁰ These kinds of negative reading experiences are often left out of most reader-response theory. The nearest form of it seems to be found in feminist reader-response theory, as in Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader*, which I discuss in Chapter Four. Most theories of resistant readers are based in political or identity-based critical schools (feminism, post-colonialism, queer studies, etc.). While much of the resistance going on in indignant reading need not be political or ethical in this way, such studies do provide a helpful model for thinking about resistance as a readerly act. Without criticizing the ethical orientation of such studies, I want to suggest that any reader can resist the sway of a text without it being a resistance to a culturally dominant value-system. They can resist it because it makes them uncomfortable, because they don't like it, or don't like part of it, because some aspect of a text makes them angry. Theories of reading must engage with such responses.

To understand negative reading experiences, it is usually necessary to refer to evidence of the responses of real readers, to historicist accounts of reading. But this leads us to the bugbear of reader theory: idiosyncrasy. The problem of idiosyncratic readers, of the infinite possibilities of individual variation, has cast serious doubt on the theoretical potential of any study of readers. What theoretical payoff could an analysis have if it only reveals one individual's personal reaction? While any particular reader's indignation is likely a result of a number of factors, some based in the text, some in the context of reading, and some in the personal character and

⁴⁰ Warner, 15.

experience of the reader herself, readerly indignation against authors on behalf of characters is at the same time a response that recurs time and time again, with notable instances in the eighteenth century, rising to critical prominence in the nineteenth century, and finding expression in a few distinct forms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Moreover, the examples I focus on are found in Victorian literary criticism, which lends them both particularity and exemplarity. A review expressing a critic's indignation is not only evidence of that particular reader's indignation, but also evidence of conventions of describing and discussing literature. This allows my analysis to have more powerful implications for theories of readership than a series of examples culled from letters and other observations might have.

If we are to understand how reading works, we must understand, ultimately, not only how people of the twentieth century read, but how Victorians read, and how readers of the eighteenth century read, and so on. This should not be disconnected from theoretical accounts of reading. If Victorians read differently than twentieth-century readers, our understanding of the act of reading must be able to account for both, as well as the differences between modern theories of reading and earlier theories of reading.

Those issues that modern theorists are most interested in tend to dominate the field and the theory to such an extent that the literary world, past *and* present, may be misrepresented.⁴¹ A reader-response perspective on many of the questions asked by narratology and cognitive/evolutionary critics demands some level of historicization. Any particular reader is deeply circumscribed in time and place—so to identify that reader's implicit perception of or conception of reading, plot, characterization, or fictionality is to identify a conception of a

⁴¹ Alan Palmer makes this point in *Fictional Minds* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004) with respect to the focus of narrative theorists on free indirect discourse as the primary means of representing mind in narrative fiction (11).

particular historical milieu. For instance, narrative theory has provided us many terms and concepts to distinguish between the actual, flesh-and-blood author and various narratorial presences in and around a text. There are a number of reasons why this topic has been of such interest in the later twentieth century, such as the waning dominance of the New Criticism and the “Intentional Fallacy” as well as the post-structuralist on the text as the origin of meaning rather than the author. While the conceptual clarification offered by narrative theorists has been invaluable, an approach insisting on the distinction between the actual author, the implied author, and the narrator does not account for the *experiences* of many readers, especially readers from interpretive communities of other eras that theorized, implicitly or explicitly, different relations between narrators and authors. To insist that when a reader refers to the author’s intention, she actually means the implied author or the narrator, is to misrepresent both her individual reading experience as well as that of readers from a similar milieu, like Victorian readers and critics who regularly conflated the author who constructed the fiction with the author living in the world with the source of the narrative voice (in cases of third-person narration), with these confluations having significant effects on their interpretation of the work.

Indignant reading thus requires investment in multiple approaches to readers. Actual readers, in all their idiosyncrasies and resistances and quirks, are studied in historicist and historical accounts of reading, in which the theoretical implications for a theory of reader-response are often limited. Similarly, while theoretical accounts of reading tend to bring in canonical texts as examples from a range of periods, historical accounts reap the benefits of using a wide variety of popular, unpopular, complex, simple texts read widely or narrowly, with historical but not often theoretical payoffs. Bringing these two approaches to the readers together is the best way to understand the meaning of different reading practices.

Indignant Reading as a Historical Practice

Who are these actual readers who read indignantly, and how does one study their reading? Evidence of indignant reading can be found in the mid-eighteenth century, in the correspondence between Lady Bradshaigh and Samuel Richardson regarding *Clarissa*, and there may very well be further examples of indignant reading that are even older. Nonetheless, I consider indignant reading to be a particularly Victorian phenomenon, a form of interpretation that has a major place in Victorian response and criticism. The nineteenth century marks the height of indignant reading as an institutionalized aesthetic practice; indignant reading before and after is often the product of exceptional or atypical figures, like Lady Bradshaigh, whom I discuss in Chapter One, or an underground, anti-institutional community, like media fandoms, as I discuss in Chapter Four.

The questions of *why* I examine Victorians and *how* I examine Victorians can be answered in the same way: novel reviews. The prevalence of indignant reading in periodical reviews of novels not only offers plenty of evidence of indignant reading in “practice”—though such evidence can also be found in private letters, journals, and marginalia—it further suggests that indignant reading was an authoritative interpretive practice, a form not only of reading but of criticism. I study Victorians primarily through their novel reviews, and I study them *because* the use of indignant reading in novel reviewing indicates that this was a conventional form of response for Victorian critics and, to a lesser extent, readers.

Turning back to the book historians for a moment, when we apply Darnton’s communications circuit to the British nineteenth century, the complexity of the distribution mode in the period stands out, a complexity that has consequences for production and, significantly,

reception. Though novels decreased in price from the eighteenth century, they were still out of reach for many would-be readers; serial publication in magazines and in independently-released parts made many novels far more widely available, though in an entirely different material form. Readers also obtained material through circulating libraries. Proprietors of libraries and editors of periodicals, along with publishers, determined the nature of the material to be distributed, which thus had an effect on the nature of the material produced by authors and read by readers. The subject of how these various formats and modes of distribution determined and affected readers has been covered—and continues to be covered—by a variety of critics. My particular interest is in the role of periodical criticism in this communications circuit.

Though it might be tempting to see novel reviews only as evidence of reception—this has traditionally been the primary use of Victorian reviews, and I certainly use them this way—they should probably be understood as residing in both the distribution and reception nodes of the circuit. In the nineteenth century, periodical criticism is not only a public response but also helps to determine whether and how a work might be read by individuals in private contexts. It is, of course, also evidence of reception, but reception shaped by a series of institutional factors, including length and detail requirements, relationships between reviewers, editors, publishers, or authors, and the politics and ideals of any particular journal.

The form of periodical reviews and the impact of any of these factors is wildly variant and in many cases unknown. Some reviews are anonymous, while others are not, and the significance of anonymity changes throughout the period, as it was the standard practice prior to the founding of the *Fortnightly Review* in 1865. Some articles cover seven novels in two short columns, giving only a few sentences to each one; others examine two or three novels, linked in some way, over a more expansive twenty or thirty pages; still others spend fifty or more pages

discussing an author's entire oeuvre. Even these longer forms often have as their object the description and evaluation of novels to those who may not have read them (though those on single authors are usually retrospective). This means that much of the review is constituted by plot summary and character description, material whose significance has often been overlooked by scholars of the Victorian period.

The emphasis on reviews of specific novels intended to guide readers leads critics to concerns distinct from those contained in the period's abstract literary theory, which is primarily constituted by aesthetic theory, a physiological and psychological analysis in which art is considered in its expressive forms, on the model of music. Reviews, in which abstract theory is subordinated to the function of evaluating particular novels—not “what is art” but “what makes some art good and some bad”—reveal many of the underlying literary theories that may not have been explicitly formulated as principles but nonetheless determined how critics talked and wrote and, to some extent, thought about novels. Moreover, an emphasis on periodical reviews allows me to avoid some of the pitfalls of example-selection of narratological and cognitive analysis. Reviews reference novels that today are long out of print by authors scarcely remembered as often as they refer to the major canonical novels of the nineteenth century. The authoritative weight of the language of reviews, along with the sheer repetition of formulations, justifies serious attention to those formulations and their implications for conceptions of plot, characterization, and fictionality, which form the subjects of my first three chapters.

In Chapter One: “Poetic Injustice,” I examine the most prominent instances of indignation: readers and critics who complain of authors “punishing” or “killing off” their characters, a category that includes those angry readers of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. At key moments in fictional texts, readers identify *plot*—the things that happen, the deaths, the

marriages, the sudden windfalls—as something that authors *do to* their characters, something to be *enacted* unjustly *onto* characters. I argue that this conception of plot arises from the tradition of “poetic justice,” a literary-critical principle originating in the seventeenth century in which poetry (in contrast to history) was supposed to represent the ideal world of providential justice—virtue rewarded and vice punished. Poetic justice is transformed into indignant reading when the religious aspects of poetic justice are de-emphasized in favor of readerly wishes, when “reward” is assumed to belong to those characters whom readers care for, rather than those who are most virtuous.

So what does this mean for a Victorian understanding of plot? Readers and critics seem to accept some plotted events as parts of the fictional world, whereas others are understood as separate from this world and originating from the author. A model of poetic justice would suggest that plot can be attributed to the author when an ethical breach becomes evident, when the text fails to live up to its moral responsibility. The model of indignant reading, however, suggests that the breach is also an aesthetic one, arising from moments of insufficient internal causality. When a chance event occurs—an event not sufficiently motivated within the fictional world—Victorian readers and critics often attribute it to the author and his/her own motivations.

When a reader accuses an author of killing a character, two questions emerge: first, in what sense is death an act of murder, and second, what is this thing that can be “killed”? The first chapter answers the former question, and the second addresses the latter. To speak of killing characters takes “character” for granted as a life-like, coherent unit. In fact, Victorian readers and critics also object indignantly to errors and injustices in characterization, which I examine in Chapter Two: “Out of Character.” Critics often complain that a character is acting “out of character,” and that this behavior has actually been dictated by the author; that is, as Swinburne

vehemently complains, George Eliot made Maggie Tulliver act a certain way that ultimately harmed Maggie's character. I propose that characterization is evaluated on three axes: the external, the internal, and the dramatic. On the external axis, critics evaluate characterization according to real-world correspondence and accuracy. On the internal axis, critics evaluate characterization according to consistency throughout the narrative. The dramatic axis allows critics to distinguish between *descriptive* characterization (Maggie is a brunette) and *evaluative* characterization (Maggie is selfish). They usually acknowledge that authors have full rights over the former, but continually argue with authorial authority over the latter. Authors could be wrong about their own characters.

Nineteenth-century critics, then, frequently blamed the author for trespassing on the "rights" of his/her own fictional creations and assumed that some basic justice was owed to make-believe characters. In contrast, twentieth-century theories of fictionality depend on the idea of fiction as illusion and a willful forgetting of reality; to believe that Rosamond can be harmed, one would have to forget that she was created by an author. For Victorian critics and readers, however, George Eliot could harm Rosamond *because* she created her. Chapter Three: "Fictionality in the Nineteenth Century" investigates the underlying conception of the fictional and its relation to the real that accounts for the prevalence of indignation in Victorian reading. Victorian critics conceptually divided the field of letters along generic lines that did not fully correspond to the fiction/nonfiction binary, instead emphasizing distinctions along the lines of probability, idealism, and expressivity. History and the novel are thus closely aligned genres, despite differing in terms of fictionality, and the historian's relationship to his text is a crucial model for critics in considering the author's relationship to *his* text.

Together, these three chapters, on plot, character, and fictionality, offer a version of Victorian aesthetics that challenges standard views of nineteenth-century realism and mimesis. Henry James's famous assertion that character (the determination of incident) and plot (the illustration of character) are inseparable implies a conception of realist fiction as constructing a seamless illusion of independence and coherence. Realist fiction purportedly creates miniature models of our own world, as Peter Brooks has argued,⁴² a world in which the agency of ourselves and the people around us determine, and are illustrated by, incident. There is no external hand forcing us to get married or act a certain way; there is no externality at all, and it is this integrity that realist texts seek to imitate or reproduce.⁴³

As J. Jeffrey Franklin has it, "nineteenth-century realist novels raise mimetic play to a historical high point, enacting what may be the culmination of mimesis in its formal refinement throughout the century toward a more thorough elision of the author and effacement of the text's fictional status."⁴⁴ Theories of realism have often suggested that the goal of the realist text is textual transparency—that realism seeks to offer an unmediated view of reality:

To gain immediate access to the real, we rely on particular forms of mediation—forms that must seem to erase themselves in the very moment of their mediating activity. The purpose of the representation's appearance is, it would seem, to disappear. And since the

⁴² Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 2.

⁴³ There are, of course, a number of other defining features of realism, many of which focus on the content of the representation. Among other features, critics have identified the materiality of time and place, a broadened scope that includes multiple spheres of society, an increased focus on recently developed urban environments, an interest in industrial capitalism, and an emphasis on the ordinary and everyday (to which I shall return) as constitutive characteristics of nineteenth-century realism. Moreover, a number of scholars have challenged the view of realism as naively mimetic by emphasizing the ways in which realist novels are interested in the question of representation and authorship. In most of these accounts, however, what tends to remain true is that, to borrow a phrase, there is nothing outside the text; critics tend to focus on what is represented rather than how the act of realist representation is perceived.

⁴⁴ J. Jeffrey Franklin, *Serious Play: The Cultural Form of the Nineteenth-Century Realist Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 23.

realist mediating apparatus never does dissolve, realist art has more often than not been deemed a failure.⁴⁵

There is, therefore, a contradiction inherent in this idea of realism, which depends on an erasure of the author and his or her labor. The mediating role of the author and his/her language is never more obvious than when it is trying to disappear.

The fact that Victorian readers and critics are so ready to attribute perceived aesthetic, affective, and ethical problems to authors reflects their skepticism about realist representation. This is not an unprecedented view; Caroline Levine has argued against the conception of realism as representational transparency, instead finding in Victorian theories of realism a deep skepticism about the possibilities, successes, and failures of mimetic representation.⁴⁶ This is also the overriding impression of the reviews and other reports of reading experiences I have examined: skepticism about the author's choices and attempts at representation and creation. Crucially, this skepticism belonged both to critics, whose job it was, after all, to criticize authors and their texts, and to readers, whose only task was to enjoy and consume, or not. Such a skepticism, a suspension not of disbelief but of belief, cannot therefore be said to invalidate the power of the representation.

Victorian readers understood both realism and fiction more generally as *constructed*. Richard Walsh has pointed out that "it is [often] taken as axiomatic that the reader's emotional involvement with fiction must be with its represented reality; and that the strengths of feelings aroused therefore depends upon the adequacy with which this reality is conveyed."⁴⁷ But

⁴⁵ Caroline Levine, *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 23-24.

⁴⁶ Franklin also argues that readers of realism experience "an oscillation between the imaginary and the real" because realist representation provides "images of society" that are "simultaneously *very* like and *very* unlike the predominant understanding of what the social reality is" (31).

⁴⁷ Walsh, 308-309.

indignant readers are always responding not only to the represented reality but to the process of representation and creation; it is the interchange between the two that produces indignation.

Just as indignant reading can be found prior to the nineteenth century, so too can it be found in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The possibility of indignation, built into Victorian literary discourse, was transformed and redirected, largely as a result of the rise of academic literary criticism and reactions against thinking of characters as “real people.” In some ways, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are too sophisticated for indignant reading, and yet in some ways it has gone even further than the nineteenth century in registering and even remedying the problem of mistreated fictional characters. In Chapter Four: “Reading Indignantly After the Victorians,” I explore two case studies of modern indignant reading: feminist revisionary reading and writing, and fan creation and criticism. Feminist indignant reading achieves its place in the academy at a price: the gradual reduction of the role of particular characters, authors, and ultimately the more overt expressions of affect. In contrast, fans *perform* and even sometimes exaggerate their affect, as their intense investment in emotional attitudes toward fictional characters leads to disdain for the lack of talent and artistry of the creators of those fictional characters.

The indignant readings of the modern era highlight the ostensible contradictions of indignant reading. Indignant reading is both private and public, naïve and knowing, illusioned and disillusioned. These antithetical approaches to fiction were united, however, in the nineteenth century, and my dissertation reads such responses not as contradictory or exceptional but as normative in Victorian literary criticism.

Chapter One:

Poetic Injustice

[My uncle...] was so enchanted with Little Nell that anyone might have supposed she was a real living child in whose sad fate he was deeply interested. One evening while silently reading ... he suddenly sprung from his chair, flung the book violently on the ground, and exclaimed “The Villain! The Rascal!! The bloodthirsty scoundrel!!!” His astonished brother thought he had gone mad, and enquired aghast of whom he was speaking? “Dickens,” he roared, “he would commit murder! He killed my little Nell — He killed my sweet little child”!⁴⁸

John Forster, friend and biographer of Charles Dickens, received the above account of reading in a letter from Mrs. Jane Greene. He wrote in the margins, “Kept for its comicality!” It is funny, this hyperbolic, emotional, and naïve reaction to the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and Forster was certainly not the last to be amused by such readings. Despite its apparent foolishness, though, the response of Jane Greene’s uncle, like many similar responses to Little Nell and other fictional characters, from Clarissa Harlowe to Captain Kirk, offers an important case-study in the experience of fiction, especially the fiction of the Victorian period, that heyday of treating fictional characters like real people.

Jane Greene’s uncle is an example of what I call an “indignant reader”; indignant at Dickens on behalf of Little Nell, he interprets her death as an act of murder by her creator. It may be tempting to dismiss such a response, as Forster did. But indignation, rooted and expressed in emotion, indicates a complex literary judgment by the reader. Unlike emotions like anger or sadness, indignation more clearly has the capacity to be a two-pronged response: one may be

⁴⁸ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey, vol. 2, 1840-1841 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), x. Emphasis in the original.

indignant *at* someone (an author) and *on behalf of* someone *else* (a fictional character). The prongs are directed at two distinct levels, the real and the fictional, and contain seemingly opposed perspectives on the nature of fiction, the one treating the fictional as real (Little Nell is so real that the reader feels acute sympathy for her) and the other treating the fictional as constructed (the reader recognizes that the author had the option of writing a different outcome for Nell).

Thus, indignation is not only an intense engagement with the fictional world but is also deeply critical of its creation and management. As an expression of readerly frustration and a common critical practice in Victorian periodicals, indignant reading reveals a submerged Victorian aesthetics of fiction, a set of guidelines or rules (even those that are contradictory) visible only when they are broken by a text or author. This aesthetics is inseparable from readers' and critics' emotional and ethical concerns about fiction, in the general and in the particular. One of the aesthetic issues at stake in the case of Little Nell is plot; Jane Greene's uncle is indignant not because Dickens has mischaracterized Nell (such responses are discussed in the following chapter), but because Dickens has used the authorial power of plot to enact her death.

Victorian indignation over plotting is regularly expressed in terms of "poetic justice," as readers and critics object to the improper authorial reward and punishment of characters. The language of poetic justice is an authoritative critical discourse that allows for the expression of personal sentiment, on the part of both literary critics and casual readers. The terms of poetic justice, I argue, allow Victorian readers and reviewers to critique the construction of plots in fiction along several conflicting axes: ethics, readerly satisfaction, and probability. This critical tradition as it is transformed in the nineteenth century encourages readers and critics to hold the

author responsible for events that occur, especially events that seem to arise from chance or are insufficiently motivated.

The Origins of Poetic Justice

Poetic justice arises from an ongoing literary debate that, on the surface, has little to do with readerly indignation. Should literature show things as they ought to be, in an ideal world, or should it reflect the imperfections of actuality? Theories contending that it is literature's duty to represent the ideal may be considered early forms of poetic justice.⁴⁹ But the term itself was not coined until 1677 by poet and dramatist Thomas Rymer, who aimed to delineate the benefits of poetry:

And besides the *purging* of the *passions*; something must stick by observing that constant order, that harmony and beauty of Providence, that necessary relation and chain, whereby the causes and the effects, the virtues and rewards, the vices and their punishments are proportion'd and link'd together; how deep and dark soever are laid the Springs, and however intricate and involv'd are their operations.⁵⁰

Literature, Rymer suggests, ought to represent an ideal world of perfect justice, in which virtue is rewarded according to its merits and vice similarly punished. While the idea of depicting an ideal world is not unique to Rymer, in his conception, the ideal world is ideal because of *justice*—not love, or peace, or understanding—and justice is explicitly defined by proper reward and proper

⁴⁹ Plato, for instance, argued that the poet's duty was to conform to the truth of God, who cannot be the author of evil. Therefore, for wickedness to triumph in literature was intolerable because contrary to the truth of God—to Heavenly justice. Moreover, the triumph of evil, if represented, might serve as potential incentive to audiences to commit acts of evil. See Michael A. Quinlan, *Poetic Justice in the Drama: The History of an Ethical Principle in Literary Criticism* (Notre Dame: Indiana University Press, 1912), 33-35.

⁵⁰ Thomas Rymer, "The Tragedies of the Last Age," in *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), 75.

punishment. The apportioning out of rewards and punishments remained the touchstone of the principle of poetic justice as it was discussed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Rymer's definition posits a causal relation between virtue/vice and reward/punishment; the idea of reward and punishment as "effects" means that they are to be manifested on the level of plot, in discernible, often material, events (like marriage or death) and goods (like wealth, or its absence). This causal relationship, though, is metaphysical and therefore usually hidden or invisible. The rewards and punishments, then, may seem to come directly from the author, as a judgment on the moral worth of the various characters. Poetic justice thus encouraged a form of reading that categorized fictional characters into binaries—good or bad, moral or vicious, hero or villain—and then evaluated key plot events as the manifestation of authorial judgment (and/or God's judgment) through rewards and punishments.⁵¹

With the causality of reward and punishment hidden, readers might explain any event in a fiction in one of two ways: one that maintains the integrity of the fictional world by interpreting the event as coherent within the fictional world; and one that explains the event as poetic justice, as punishment or reward enacted by the author. Consider the death of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*. Perhaps she dies because it is in her nature to sacrifice herself for others, especially her brother, whose love she has always desperately sought. In that case, the actions leading to her death are coherent within the terms of the fictional world. On the other hand, her death can be interpreted as a punishment: in nearly eloping with Stephen Guest, she has been selfish, damaged the lives of Lucy and Philip, and "ruined" herself in the eyes of the town, including her brother. The flood comes not from the river but from the author, a mechanism for the punishment of Maggie's bad behavior. The latter explanation implies an understanding of

⁵¹ For more on this idea, see John C. Traver, "The Inconclusive Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph: Problems of Poetic Justice, Closure, and Gender," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 20, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 35-60.

fiction as porous and permeable, in which it can be acted upon and manipulated by real-world figures like the author. This conception is usually marked by an operational language in which the author is the agent of actions in the fictional world, such as when Nell's death is described as a murder committed by Dickens. Poetic justice thus prompts indignant readings; both use this operational language, a sign that that authors are *doing things* to characters. Rymer defined poetic justice as a principle of representation—rewards and punishments must be represented in ethically ideal fashion—but for readers, poetic justice becomes a principle of authorial *behavior*, as the author must actively save or punish them.

The force of the poetic justice principle was especially clear during the controversy surrounding Nahum Tate's edition of *King Lear*, first performed in 1681, in which the innocent Cordelia not only lives but is rewarded with Edgar's love.⁵² Tate's version of the play does not refer to poetic justice by name, but he does defend his revisions on aesthetic and ethical grounds. It allows him to provide further justification for Cordelia's "indifference" to Lear when he asks how much his daughters love him—he is attempting to force her to wed France, when she of course loves Edgar. It also heightens the "distress" of the tale, presumably by adding a dramatic love plot to the tragic issues already raised in the play. Finally, the revisions allow Tate to conclude the tale in "a success to the innocent distrest persons," in contrast to the many tragedies that conclude with the stage encumbered with dead bodies.⁵³ The language of "innocent distrest persons" suggests that the idea of poetic justice is indeed somewhere behind these revisions, and Joseph Addison attributed the revisions solely to poetic justice. Arguing that the reformed *Lear*

⁵² Interestingly, a number of Dickens' readers compared Little Nell's death to that of Cordelia.

⁵³ Nahum Tate, "To my esteemed friend Thomas Boteler, Esq," dedication to *History of King Lear, Revived with Alterations* (London: 1699).

“lost half its beauty,” Addison offered his opposition to criticism that insisted on the rules of poetic justice:

The *English* Writers of Tragedy are possessed with a Notion, that when they represent a virtuous or innocent Person in distress, they ought not to leave him till they have delivered him out of his Troubles, or made him triumph over his Enemies. This error they have been led into by a ridiculous Doctrine in modern Criticism, that they are obliged to an equal Distribution of Rewards and Punishments, and an impartial Execution of poetical Justice.... [W]e find, that more of our *English* Tragedies have succeeded, in which the Favourites of the Audience sink under their Calamities, than those in which they recover themselves out of them.⁵⁴

Addison uses operational language to describe the workings of poetic justice; it is the *writers* who must deliver their characters out of their troubles and make them triumph.

While Addison seems to be deeply skeptical of the principle of poetic justice, “that ridiculous doctrine,” he eventually accepts the principle more fully. In a later issue of *The Spectator* in 1712, Addison suggests that the punishment of even the apparently virtuous is acceptable because nobody can actually be perfect. Punishment can always be justified within the terms of poetic justice because even the hero of any particular play has necessarily made some mistake along the way, and it is that for which he is being punished. From this new perspective, punishment is always righteous, and all suffering (including that of virtuous characters) can be interpreted as punishment: “The best of Men may deserve Punishment, but the worst of Men cannot deserve happiness.”⁵⁵ The “equal distribution of rewards and punishments” can at least be tolerated.

Addison’s change of mind about the merits of poetic justice suggests the extent to which it became an established critical principle by the mid-eighteenth century. It could be used not

⁵⁴ *The Spectator*, no. 40 (April 16, 1711), *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 1:168-169.

⁵⁵ *The Spectator*, no. 548 (November 28, 1712), *The Spectator*, 4:463-465.

only by critics but by ordinary readers to demand different authorial choices, as became clear to Samuel Richardson during his extensive correspondence in the 1740s on his novel *Clarissa*. A number of Richardson's readers insisted that it would be moral, in accordance with the standards of poetic justice, as well as emotionally satisfying, for the virtuous, victimized Clarissa to live on in happiness; such an outcome would both please and instruct. Richardson, in turn, though he was often eager to please his readers, insisted on the moral necessity of his chosen outcome, the death of Clarissa, even within the terms of poetic justice.

While Colley Cibber, dramatist and friend of Richardson, likened Richardson to Lovelace himself in his villainy—"If you have betrayed her into any shocking company, you will be as accountable for it, as if you were yourself the monster that took delight in her calamity"⁵⁶—Lady Bradshaigh more clearly invoked poetic justice in her pleas to Richardson.

Sir, after you have brought the divine Clarissa to the very brink of destruction, let me intreat (may I say, insist upon) a turn, that will make your almost despairing readers half mad with joy. I know you cannot help doing it, to give yourself satisfaction; for I pretend to know your heart so well, that you must think it a crime, never to be forgiven, to leave vice triumphant, and virtue depressed....⁵⁷

It is the principle of poetic justice that allows Lady Bradshaigh's assurance that Richardson knows it is a crime "to leave vice triumphant, and virtue depressed." Poetic justice also allows her to combine her emotional demands with ethical demands.

In response to these and similar entreaties, Richardson maintained that the ending he planned and then carried out—Clarissa's rape and death—was ultimately in keeping with the principle of poetic justice. Clarissa's death is not the triumph of vice but of virtue:

⁵⁶ Colley Cibber to Richardson, May 27, 1750, in *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, ed. Anna Laetitia Barbauld (London: Printed for Richard Phillips, 1804), 2:173.

⁵⁷ Belfour [Lady Bradshaigh] to Richardson, October 10, 1748, in *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, 4: 179.

“Clarissa has the greatest of triumphs even in this world. The greatest, I will venture to say, even *in* and *after* the outrage, and *because* of the outrage, that ever woman had.”⁵⁸ Poetic justice as Lady Bradshaigh and similar readers understand it, Richardson insisted in his postscript to the novel, is blasphemous.

A writer who follows nature, and pretends to keep the Christian system in his eye, cannot make a heaven in this world for his favourites, or represent this life otherwise than as a state of probation. Clarissa, I once more aver, could not be rewarded in this world.... What greater moral proof can be given of a world after this, for the rewarding of suffering virtue, and for the punishing of oppressive vice, than the inequalities in the distribution of rewards and punishments here below?⁵⁹

Temporal and Providential rewards cannot be analogous because Providence provides the reward that the temporal world cannot and does not. Providential justice—the referent, supposedly, of poetic justice—only exists in Providence; authors with characters in the temporal world are thus obliged to represent inequality with the assumption that these characters will receive justice “above,” in Providence. (Lady Bradshaigh peevishly replied that she had every intention of rewarding Clarissa with Heaven – after a long a prosperous life.⁶⁰) In short, then, to defer reward until after death is in keeping with the true spirit of poetic justice. Emphasizing that this reinterpretation of poetic justice is essentially conciliatory rather than oppositional, Richardson also points out that he very properly punishes the villainous characters of the novel:

For, is not Mr. Lovelace, who could persevere in his villainous views, against the strongest and most frequent convictions and remorse that ever were sent to awaken and

⁵⁸ Richardson to Belfour [Lady Bradshaigh], undated, *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, 4:224-225.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁶⁰ Belfour [Lady Bradshaigh] to Richardson, undated, *Correspondence*, 4:211. “You sometimes talk as if you thought I had a mind to rob Clarissa of her reward in Heaven, when the only difference between us is, whether she ought to have it now, or after some more years of happiness in this world; indeed I do wish Lovelace to accompany her, after sharing her happiness here: there we do differ greatly.”

reclaim a wicked man—is not this great, this *willful* transgressor condignly *punished*;...
[A]re not the *whole* Harlowe family...*are they not all likewise exemplarily punished?*⁶¹

Richardson does not strictly deny the paradigm of poetic justice, but reinterprets it to fit his own conception of literary morality.

In many ways, the reception of *Clarissa* was an exceptional case, but even so, readers and author used poetic justice as a language in common. Richardson agreed that the heroine should be rewarded, and he agreed that Clarissa was the heroine who deserved to be rewarded; he merely disagreed with his readers over what constituted a reward. His defense against his detractors is not to deny that poetic justice should be followed; rather, it is to partially reinterpret it so that his novel fits within its tenets.

From Ethics to Affect: Poetic Justice in the Nineteenth Century

In the nineteenth century, the concept of poetic justice transformed. Instead of categories of virtue, determinations of poetic justice (or injustice) were increasingly based on readerly preference, interest, and sympathy. Readers' sense of reward and punishment was decoupled from a moral basis—the distinction between the virtuous and the villainous—and attached to readers' own feelings for particular characters. Readers want the characters they like to be happy, or at least to receive the ending that makes them happy *for* those characters. The first sign of change emerged with the publication of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* in 1818. The mismatch between Scott and his readers in their interpretation of poetic justice reveals the concept in flux, but as Dickens and Anthony Trollope responded to similar reader complaints, poetic justice was once

⁶¹ Samuel Richardson, postscript to *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985), 1498.

again stabilized as a discourse reflecting readerly desires for their favorite and least favorite characters.

Ivanhoe caused a stir when it was published, and its characters remained in the public imagination for decades to come. The novel's hero, Sir Wilfred of Ivanhoe, is disinherited by his father for courting the fair-haired Lady Rowena. Injured in a tournament, Ivanhoe is tended to by the beautiful Rebecca, a Jewish healer, who eventually falls in love with him. When Rebecca is abducted by a Templar and accused of witchcraft, Ivanhoe acts as her champion in a trial by combat. She is eventually found innocent and leaves England with her father, while Ivanhoe marries Rowena, to the dismay, vehemently expressed, of a number of readers.

Reviews of the novel and other commentaries emphasized how insipid and uninteresting they found Rowena, in contrast to the pathos and interest raised by Rebecca. This is a constant in discussions of the novel, and many of the stage adaptations reduced the role of Rowena in favor of that of Rebecca.⁶² Commentators consistently evaluated characters' relative worth in terms of interest, rather than, or at least in addition to, metrics of virtue. Of course, it was perhaps Rebecca's suffering in the name of virtue that makes her so "interesting," but it is crucial that these readers are not making a claim for poetic injustice on the basis of virtue; Rowena, whom readers largely hated, is certainly sufficiently virtuous. A reviewer in the *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review*, for instance, writes that "the character of Rebecca and her adventures, it will be confessed, inspire a very superior interest to those of Rowena, the nominal heroine of the

⁶² Writing in the early nineteenth century, Lady Louisa Stuart describes herself as "Rebecca's devoted admirer" – and she had this to say about the novel: "Was not it *sweet*? Whoever converses with Scotch people learns to be sick of that; but it could never be applied to Rebecca. The Lady Rowena, bating her pride of birth and habit of having her own way, is pretty much 'a sweet woman.'" *The Letters of Lady Louisa Stuart*, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: J. Lane, The Bodley Head, 1926), 171. For theatrical adaptations, see Dibdin's *Ivanhoe; or the Jew's Daughter* (1820), as well as John Cormack's *Rebecca* (1871); the titles themselves indicate their focus. Additionally, reviews of Sir Arthur Sullivan's opera *Ivanhoe* (1891) emphasized Rebecca's role.

romance, and, indeed, so far as relates to this lady and Ivanhoe, there is little interest excited.”⁶³ Nassau Senior, in the *Quarterly Review*, identifies Rebecca as “the grace of the whole story” and observes that while Rowena is “beautiful and amiable” her romance with Ivanhoe is “insipid.”⁶⁴ Coleridge notes that he can never finish *Ivanhoe* because he knows that Rebecca’s case is hopeless, while Rowena’s excites “comparatively feeble interest.”⁶⁵ *London Magazine*, in 1820, reports that the critic joins Ivanhoe in thinking more of Rebecca than of Rowena, and questions why it is heroes of novels so often choose the wrong wives: “the unsuccessful lady is usually the one we should have preferred, and certainly in this case, Rebecca is infinitely more calculated to interest than Rowena.... Rebecca, the Jewess, must ever be ours by the ties of affection and pity....”⁶⁶ The claims of readers and reviewers rest on personal preference, finding Rebecca interesting and Rowena bland and insipid.

W. M. Thackeray expands on this pattern of reception in his 1850 tongue-in-cheek sequel to *Ivanhoe*, entitled *Rebecca and Rowena*, in which Ivanhoe leaves Rowena, who re-marries and then dies, and finally marries Rebecca, who has converted to Christianity. This is Thackeray’s version of poetic justice. Rebecca, he argues, and not Rowena, should have “won” Ivanhoe:

Nor can I ever believe that such a woman, so admirable, so tender, so heroic, so beautiful, could disappear altogether before such another woman as Rowena, that vapid, flaxen-haired creature who is, in my humble opinion, unworthy of Ivanhoe, and unworthy of her

⁶³ “*Ivanhoe: a Romance*,” *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* 2, no. 34 (January 8, 1820): 23-24.

⁶⁴ Nassau Senior, “*Rob Roy, Tales of my Landlord, 2d Series, (Heart of Mid Lothian), Tales of my Landlord, 3d Series, (Bride of Lammermoor, Montrose), Ivanhoe, Monastery, Abbot, Kenilworth*,” *Quarterly Review* 26, no. 51 (October 1821): 127-128.

⁶⁵ Marginalia from the end of *Ivanhoe* in a set of Scott’s novels owned by Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 329.

⁶⁶ The *London Magazine* reviewer continues: “We cannot refrain from joining Ivanhoe, in thinking more of the Jew’s daughter, ‘than the fair descendent of Alfred might otherwise have approved.’ Old Isaac, and his child Rebecca, are the two best drawn, and certainly the worst used characters in the novel.” “Critical Notice of New Books. II. *Ivanhoe, A Romance*,” *London Magazine* 1, no.1 (January 1820): 81.

place as a heroine. Had both of them got their rights, it ever seemed to me that Rebecca would have had the husband, and Rowena would have gone off to a convent and shut herself up, where I, for one, would never have taken the trouble of enquiring for her.⁶⁷

Thackeray's distinction between Rebecca and Rowena is not based on a comparison of their virtue: rather, one is tender and beautiful, and the other is vapid. Moreover, he objects to *Ivanhoe* on the level of verisimilitude *and* on the level of plot construction. Thackeray elides the distinction between the justice of one character's treatment of another (Ivanhoe's romantic neglect of Rebecca in favor of Rowena), an issue fully situated within the world of the text, and the justice of an author's positioning of a character in the text, a question of fictional construction. Rebecca deserves not only the reward of Ivanhoe but also the reward of "her place as a heroine," her prominence in the text. It is only because of such porousness of the boundaries between fiction and reality—between absorption in the fictional world and attention to the artifact of the fiction—that we can be indignant at authors for their treatment of fictional characters. In a similar elision, as he imagines the futures of the characters as Scott wrote them, Thackeray writes, "Forbid it Fate, forbid it poetical justice!"⁶⁸ The fate of the internal world of the fiction is, of course, identical to the poetic justice created and arranged by the author.

Scott's readers, I suggest, were typical of nineteenth-century readers in asking that the characters they liked best, rather than the most virtuous characters, be rewarded. Scott's response to such readers in his 1830 preface to the novel highlights the novelty of these readers' demands; he fundamentally misunderstood what they wanted and why. Like Richardson before him, Scott responds in the language of poetic justice, insisting that his conclusion was, essentially, in

⁶⁷ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Rebecca and Rowena* (London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2002), 5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

keeping with the principle of rewarding the virtuous and punishing the villainous—that is, Scott responds like an author from the eighteenth century.

The character of the fair Jewess found so much favour in the eyes of some fair readers, that the writer was censured because, when arranging the fates of the characters of the drama, he had not assigned the hand of Wilfrid to Rebecca, rather than the less interesting Rowena. But, not to mention that the prejudices of the age rendered such an union almost impossible, the Author may, in passing, observe, that he thinks a character of a highly virtuous and lofty stamp is degraded rather than exalted by an attempt to reward virtue with temporal prosperity.... In a word, if a virtuous and self-denied character is dismissed with temporal wealth, greatness, rank, or the indulgence of such a rashly-formed or ill-assorted passion as that of Rebecca for Ivanhoe, the reader will be apt to say, ‘Verily virtue has had its reward.’ But a glance on the great picture of life will show that the duties of self-denial, and the sacrifice of passion to principle, are seldom thus remunerated...⁶⁹

In Scott’s account, readers have called attention to the author’s role in managing the fates of his characters—he both “arranges” and “assigns.” This operational language suggests that Scott believes his readers object to his novel on the grounds of poetic justice. Scott’s defense here is reminiscent of Richardson’s response to *his* indignant readers, when he suggested that “true reward” was otherworldly. In rejecting the premise on which poetic justice is often based – that characters should be rewarded with temporal rewards – Scott attempts to locate the morality of literature on a different plane. But since his readers are objecting on an affective basis rather than an ethical one, this line of defense seems unlikely to convince anyone to rescind their objections.

Moreover, following his belief that his readers object to the punishment of a virtuous character, he points out that Rebecca is not entirely virtuous. He declares her love for Ivanhoe a “rashly-formed or ill-assorted passion”—not a vice, perhaps, but not exactly a virtue. But there is no sign of such a judgment in *Ivanhoe*, where her love is presented as pure and genuine. And

⁶⁹ Sir Walter Scott, preface to *Ivanhoe*, vol. 9 of *The Waverley Novels*, Library edition (Boston: S.H. Parker and B.B. Mussey, 1852-3), 10.

Scott's own account of the indignant readers suggests that they "favored" Rebecca because they found her more "interesting." Scott's defense of the conclusion rests, then, on a re-interpretation, not a rejection, of the "rewards" entailed by poetic justice, as well as an interpretation of Rebecca as not wholly deserving of reward.

Scott defends his novel against the critique of poetic injustice but essentially accepts the terms of poetic justice. But while Scott echoes Richardson, Scott's readers do not echo Richardson's readers. Scott's readers are using the language of poetic justice, which had been a way of thinking about vice and virtue, to articulate *emotional preference*. None of them seem to care that Rebecca's passion was rash, as Scott contends, nor that rewards may be given outside of the text or fictional world. They liked her better than Rowena, were more interested in her than in Rowena, and were indignant at the perceived slight represented by Rowena's "winning" Ivanhoe's hand. It is no accident that Scott's prefatory defense of his novel made no apparent impact on Thackeray's response to the novel, written twenty years after Scott's preface. Scott and his readers, I would suggest, reveal a transformation in the use of poetic justice, one that continues despite Scott's resistance.

In later literary controversies, authors and readers alike accept that the best characters are those that readers love the most, not necessarily those that are the most virtuous. Readerly indignation over the cruel punishments doled out to loveable characters make little or no reference to the *virtue* of the characters in question, and punishment is only punishment because the readers do not like it. Moreover, many authors, including Dickens and Trollope, increasingly repeat the terms in which readers and critics object to their plots or punishments, rather than in the more antiquated terms of the eighteenth century, which define poetic justice in terms of virtue and vice.

The death of Little Nell in Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* is the occasion of one the most famous cases of uncritical emotional outpouring in response to fictional narrative. Dickens reported that he was inundated with letters from readers "recommending poor Little Nell to mercy"⁷⁰ or sharing personal stories of their own loved children who somehow resembled Nell,⁷¹ though nearly all of these letters have been lost or destroyed. Nell is undoubtedly virtuous and innocent, of course. But readers and critics almost exclusively make *emotional* appeals for her life; rather than appealing to her virtue as a reason not to punish her, they appeal to the love she has inspired.

Many readers were not only saddened over the death of Little Nell but also angry with Charles Dickens for perpetrating it. Victorian critics and readers regularly referred to the death of Little Nell as if she were a real little girl whom Dickens had the cruelty to kill, as opposed to either a young girl who died of consumption or a fictional creation with no actual life to be ended. Reviews and other reports of readers' responses frequently use words like "murder," "killing," and "cruelty." In 1850, *Fraser's Magazine* recalled that despite the anonymous letters pleading for Nell's life, "the wretch ungallantly persisted in his murderous design."⁷² The reviewer for *Metropolitan Magazine* in 1841 objected to the injustice of Nell's death on behalf of both Nell and her many readers:

[W]e are sorry...that happiness, which is so largely at the author's disposal, has not been more generously dealt out by Mr Dickens. The heroine, little Nelly, for whom every

⁷⁰ Dickens to Chapman and Hall, November 24, 1840, *Letters of Charles Dickens*, 2:153.

⁷¹ Charles Dickens, speech given at a banquet in his honor in Boston, February 1, 1842, *Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. K. J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 20. See also, Dickens to Gaylord Clark, September 28, 1841, *Letters*, 2:394.

⁷² "Charles Dickens and David Copperfield," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 42, no. 252 (December 1850): 698.

reader must have become so deeply interested, demands and deserves a better fate than to die so prematurely....⁷³

The author, in this conception, is entirely in control of “dealing out” happiness to both readers and characters (language frequently used to describe the author’s role); indeed, it is not clear whether Nell “demands and deserves a better fate” on her own merits or as a result of the reader’s deep interest in her. In a similar elision, *Blackwood’s* complains that “Mr. Dickens acted cruelly to his youthful readers in this conclusion,” despite the “host of letters begging him to spare the child.” The critic, repeating “Poor little Nell!” twice, seems wounded himself, though presumably an adult.⁷⁴

Others are much more vehement. James Fitzjames Stephen accused Dickens of enjoying the death of Little Nell far too much: “He gloats over the girl’s death as if it delighted him; he looks at it... touches, tastes, smells and handles as if it was some savoury dainty which could not be too fully appreciated.”⁷⁵ Daniel O’Connell reportedly flung away the book after Nell’s death, saying, “It was obvious that the author had not sufficient talent to maintain Nell’s adventures with interest to the end and bring them to a happy issue, so he killed her to get rid of the difficulty.”⁷⁶ He was not the only one to throw the book away from him; in addition to Jane Greene’s uncle, cited above, the sailor Ambrose Hilliard Burrows, Jr., apparently tossed the book into the sea after Little Nell’s death.⁷⁷ The physical violence upon the material form of the book

⁷³ “Notice of New Works: *Master Humphrey’s Clock*,” *Metropolitan Magazine* 30, no. 119 (March 1841): 78.

⁷⁴ “Charles Dickens,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 77, no. 474 (April 1855): 458-459.

⁷⁵ James Fitzjames Stephen, “The Relation of Novels to Real Life,” in *Cambridge Essays* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1855), 1:175.

⁷⁶ *Letters of Charles Dickens*, 2:x-xi.

⁷⁷ As reported by J. Stonehouse of Liverpool, *Letters of Charles Dickens*, 3:252n.

itself is a frequent detail in such reports, as if these indignant readers were physically expelling themselves from the fictional world in order to direct their responses to the author responsible.

Unlike Scott, Dickens offered no excuses to saddened and angered readers; in fact, he echoed their sentiments, not only grieving but feeling guilty for the murder of Nell. In an 1841 letter, Dickens, like many of his readers, compares the death of little Nell to the death of a real child, his young sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth:

I think it will come famously — but I am the wretchedest of the wretched. It casts the most horrible shadow upon me, and it is as much as I can do to keep moving at all.... I shan't recover it for a long time. Nobody will miss her like I shall. It is such a very painful thing to me, that I really cannot express my sorrow. Old wounds bleed afresh when I only think of the way of doing it: what the actual doing it will be, God knows.... Dear Mary died yesterday, when I think of this sad story.⁷⁸

In another letter from the same month, Dickens experiences what we might call indignation directed at himself, that is, guilt: “I am slowly murdering that poor child, and grow wretched over it. It wrings my heart. Yet it must be.”⁷⁹ He offers no defense of the act, admitting that it constitutes an act of murder—though of course that does not prevent Nell’s death. He is in complete agreement with his readers over the nature of the literary act.

Critics and readers continued to invoke the language of poetic justice to express their desires and demands in the controversy over the marriage choices of Lily Dale, of Anthony Trollope’s 1864 *The Small House at Allington*. Despite having two suitors, the increasingly worthless Crosbie and increasingly worthwhile Johnny, Lily is unmarried at the end of the novel—and when she reappears in 1867’s *Last Chronicle of Barset*, she *remains* unmarried. One

⁷⁸ Dickens to Forster, January 28, 1841, *Letters*, 2:181-182.

⁷⁹ Dickens to W.C. Macready, January 6, 1841, *Letters*, 3:180.

of the many critics objecting to *Small House* accused Trollope of poetic injustice against his readers:

The bitterest pill, however, which the reader has to swallow is the provokingly unsatisfactory conclusion. No jury in a court of poetical justice would convict the author of anything less than a violent assault upon his reader's feelings in leaving Lily Dale unmarried; and the sentence upon him would probably be that he should make ample compensation in another tale.... [W]e imagine that a regard for his own character as a humane novelist will urge him to do so.⁸⁰

This review conflates injustice to the character with injustice to the reader; to cruelly punish a character by not providing her with a desirable fate is to punish her readers by not providing them with a particular resolution deemed just, or rather, satisfactory. This conflation emphasizes that “poetic justice” is certainly not tied to a sense of the providential relationship between virtue and reward. As we have seen with Rebecca and Nell, it has become a language for describing readerly (and critical) affect and desire.

In reference to the continuation of Lily's story in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, Margaret Oliphant echoes the review above in suggesting that Trollope's regard for his characters ought to lead him to arrange Lily's marriage:

Mr. Trollope's readers have been cheated about this young woman.... [W]hat is the good of being an author, we should like to know, if a man cannot provide more satisfactorily for his favourite characters? Lily will not like it when she has tried it a little longer.⁸¹

Oliphant conflates readers' displeasure—they have been cheated—with that of Lily, who has not been “provided for” satisfactorily and will soon find she does not like the single life. But there is no indication that Lily *is* being punished: the character herself consistently chooses to remain single. What Oliphant means when she says Lily won't like it is that readers don't like it *for her*. There is no reason to interpret Lily's spinsterhood as a punishment for her bad behavior or lack

⁸⁰ “Current Literature,” *Illustrated London News* 1255 (April 16, 1864): 375.

⁸¹ Margaret Oliphant, “Novels,” *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 102, no. 633 (September 1867): 277-278.

of virtue, and no critics cite her virtue in defense of an alternate ending. Nonetheless, the conceptual category of poetic justice is used by her defenders.

Trollope's own response, appearing much later in his *Autobiography*, seems to be one of bemusement: "In [*Small House*] appeared Lily Dale, one of the characters which readers of my novels have liked the best. In the love with which she has been greeted, I have hardly joined with much enthusiasm, feeling that she is somewhat of a female prig."⁸² Trollope echoes his readers in suggesting that "love" is what is at stake when it comes to Lily. Rather than suggesting, like Scott, that she is insufficiently virtuous, or like Dickens, that it broke his heart to leave her single, Trollope points out that he did *not* love Lily.

Prig as she was, she made her way into the hearts of many readers, both young and old; so that, from that time to this, I have been continually honoured with letters, the purport of which has always been to beg me to marry Lily Dale to Johnny Eames. Had I done so, however, Lily would never have so endeared herself to these people as to induce them to write letters to the author concerning her fate. It was because she could not get over her troubles that they loved her.⁸³

Trollope, of course, refused to marry Lily to Johnny (he himself phrases it in the operational language arising from the tradition of poetic justice). Rather than feeling guilty about either "disappointing" Lily or defensive about disappointing his readers, Trollope understands that treating a character somewhat poorly engenders readerly bonds with those characters—they are connected to her and take her side against the villainous author. Unlike Scott or (possibly) Dickens before him, Trollope has learned that readerly indignation can be manipulated.

Between Scott and Trollope, a transformation occurred in how readers express their demands and how authors respond to them. The language of poetic justice allowed readers to

⁸² Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1999), 178-179.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

make affective demands with moral urgency and authority, when in fact what they wanted only partially resembled the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradition. Without the categories of virtue and vice playing a significant role, poetic justice could be used to demand that authors plot their characters differently, or at least to chastise them for having failed to plot them successfully. Authors, in turn, show increasing awareness of the transformation in the discourse of poetic justice, from Scott, who defended his choices with respect to traditional poetic justice, to Trollope, who cannily manipulated his readers' indignation in order to maintain their loyalty over a series of novels. Though poetic justice lost its moral basis, it remained a conventional language in common between readers, critics, and authors.

Poetic Justice and the Paradox of Chance

Indignation about violations of poetic justice reveals a conception of causality in plot different from what theorists of fiction have hitherto imagined, as well as a complicated Victorian aesthetics of plot. Henry James famously asked, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"⁸⁴ In a text, how can what a named entity *does* be distinguished from what it *is*? We only know what it is because of what it does. Plots are plots of character; characters become characters through plot. But the perspective offered by indignation over violations of poetic justice suggests otherwise; it is in fact quite common to separate or distinguish between them. When readers talk or write of authors enacting plot onto characters, of using plot against characters, they are making an implicit distinction between what is internal to the text and what is external to it. When plot

⁸⁴ Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *Partial Portraits* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 37.

becomes an action *performed on* a character, an inside and an outside are being distinguished, even as the boundary between them is being crossed. Indignant readers are thinking about how plots should be constructed in realist texts.

But why do readers accept some plotted events as natural parts of the fictional world, whereas others separate from the fictional world and become actions performed by authors on the characters? Authorial control, I suggest, emerges most clearly in those instances in which an event lacks internal causality. An ambiguous conception of causality has been crucial to poetic justice since its origins. In Rymer's 1677 formulation, it is only in Providence that virtue and vice are *causally* related to their rewards and punishments. In fictions that obey the principles of poetic justice, the author, standing in for God, must make sure to supply any reward or punishment lacking—that is, the author must be the cause. Readers may thus interpret an event as a reward or punishment *because* it has no sufficient causal relationship with what came before; alternatively, when an event has no sufficient causal relationship with what came before (within the fictional world), readers may take this as a cue to interpret it as reward or punishment from an external source.

This logic is exemplified in an 1856 review of the novel *Kathie Brunde: A Fireside History of a Quiet Life*.

Novel-readers, however, would not be content with this. Poetical justice must be done. So, in order that the goodness of Kathie may have some *material* reward, which in real life it has not often, the authoress must needs put to death the curate's wife, manifestly for the purpose of enabling him to marry Kathie at last.⁸⁵

Because it is “manifest” that the purpose of the wife's death was solely to allow the curate to marry Kathie—presumably because no other purpose or result is expressed—the critic concludes

⁸⁵ “The New Novels,” *Critic* 15, no. 375 (November 15, 1856): 537.

that this death is the author enacting poetical justice. Moreover, the weary comment on the demands of novel-readers suggests the increasingly degraded reputation of poetic justice—this turn to authorial intervention is made not for any aesthetic or particularly moral reasons but only to please readers. Such an attitude recurs frequently in Victorian criticism.

It is causality, then, that undergirds the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic plot events. Hilary Dannenberg has argued that narrative fiction attempts to establish the autonomy of the narrative world by creating the illusion of a fully internal, causally connected plot; realist texts seek to camouflage the causal role of the author. Coincidences and plot devices are thus dangerous moments when it comes to the illusion of mimesis—moments in which the ontological boundaries of the fictional world are traversed and the reader is reminded of the author's role in "manipulating" the text.⁸⁶

This is precisely what Victorian critics object to, through the language of poetic justice and the affect of indignation. Oliphant, for instance, in an 1867 discussion of Trollope in *Blackwood's* (parts of which were quoted above) objects to the death of Mrs. Proudie because it was entirely unanticipated and thus seemed to be a sign of Trollope's personal motivations:

To kill Mrs. Proudie was murder, or manslaughter at the least... she died not by natural causes, but by his [Trollope's] hand in a fit of weariness or passion. When we were thinking no evil, lo! some sudden disgust seized him, and he slew her at a blow. The crime was so uncalled for, that we not only shudder at it, but resent it. It was cruel to us; and it rather—looks—as—if—he did not know how to get through the crisis in a more natural way.⁸⁷

Though her death is represented as arising from natural causes, its suddenness, that it was "uncalled for," suggests to Oliphant that it is actually Trollope who is responsible. If Mrs.

⁸⁶ Hilary Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 25.

⁸⁷ Oliphant, 277-278.

Proudie had been murdered, a fictional agent would have been responsible. Readers might have blamed Trollope for creating that murderer or making a character murder her, but they also could have simply blamed that character. But since Mrs. Proudie dies of natural causes, the only agent conceivably responsible—if readers insist on holding an agent responsible, as they often do—is Trollope himself. That the death arises from poor writing, from an author in an aesthetic bind, seems to worsen the crime. It did not emerge from the needs of the fictional world—it emerged from the needs of the author. A death that appears to be random in the fictional world may thus be interpreted as authorial punishment. It is in this way that plot and characters separate and become partially autonomous. Chance opens a window to the real world.

Chance, however, has an odd status in fictions. Once it opens that window to the real world, it is no longer chance—it is now fully explained by the needs of fictional construction. The reader, surely, is now fully situated in the real world. Brian Richardson, in *Unlikely Stories*, defines the “paradox” of chance: “its absence indicates a specious causalism that fabricates an unusual chain of appropriate causes and predictable effects; its presence, however, always reveals authorial intervention, since chance in literature is never a chance occurrence.”⁸⁸ Robert Newsom takes this one step further with the “antinomy of fictional probability,” which is in fact central to the phenomenology of authorial punishment (or reward). Newsom argues that it “is logically not only unnecessary, but nonsensical” to assert that “the plot of *Oliver Twist* is too full of coincidences to be probable”:

[T]here ought to be no question of ascribing degrees of probability to the novel’s plot, for from the standpoint of the world of the fiction the events it describes do not put us in

⁸⁸ Brian Richardson, *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), 18.

doubt because they are certainly true, while from the standpoint of the real world they do not put us in doubt because they are certainly false.⁸⁹

We can either remain in the real world or enter the fictional world, but it is contradictory, Newsom argues, to bring them together.

But readers often *do* bring the real and fictional worlds together. It is just this boundary crossing – between fictional and real, intrinsic and extrinsic – that makes authorial injustice through plot possible. Newsom is missing a possibility; readers can and often do respond to coincidence, or other insufficiently caused events, by attributing them to the author, just as Dickens’ readers blamed him for Nell’s death, rather than concluding that because it was fictional, it was either “false” or natural from within that world. Her death is still real, as real as anything else in the fictional world, but its cause is outside that world.

This is why deaths, or other pain, caused by authors seems particularly cruel to readers—the characters still seem real. And the motivation of fictional construction may seem shockingly insufficient next to the life of an “actual” being. A *Saturday Review* discussion of Henry Stuart Cunningham’s *Wheat and Tares* from 1862 expresses horror at the imbalance between the two:

But still we cannot help doubting whether *so sudden and tremendous* a stroke *as killing off* a hero with cholera is quite in keeping with the proper character of a novelette. The poor wretch is condemned to sink under the tortures of that disease *in order that* the character of his mistress may be improved. In a novel where character had been worked out through many incidents and in various ways, *the frightful sacrifice of life* might have been held justified by its moral effects. In a story like *Wheat and Tares* we are not prepared for *so sudden* a shock to our feelings.⁹⁰ [emphasis added]

⁸⁹ Robert Newsom, *A Likely Story: Probability and Play in Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 8-9.

⁹⁰ “Wheat and Tares,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 13, no. 331 (March 1, 1862): 244-245.

The reviewer points to excess several times in this plot point: a death is *too* serious an end to the situations that have partially led to it, and *too* serious and *too* tragic for a short novel such as this one. More importantly, the operational language of “killing” (and “to kill off” suggests arbitrariness even more strongly) to describe what is fictionally a death of natural causes is invoked because this reviewer believes the point of the death was to bring about a change in a different character. This death is a plot device, rather than emerging naturally and causally from the fictional world; the character was a “frightful sacrifice.”

Thus, there is an ethics to the use of poetic justice and to authorial intervention in fiction, but this ethics, essentially created by the contradiction highlighted by Newsom, is quite different from the traditional ethics of poetic justice. Rather than a question of whether the right characters are rewarded and punished, though this issue may still be an active concern, the question in many reviewers’ minds is whether it is right to manipulate lives for the purposes of aesthetic and fictional construction. An 1879 review of L. B. Walford’s *Cousins* from *Fraser’s Magazine* explicitly considers this question:

What a waste of life there is in novels! Railway accidents are bad enough in themselves, but we doubt if any ever took away a life more undeservedly, more unnecessarily, than Mrs. Walford does in this. Had he but been injured, though even that would have been hard upon him, we could have forgiven it; but why should Jem die merely to convince the hesitating and unhappy lover that he cannot marry one woman for the sake of honour while he loves the other?⁹¹

This reviewer objects to the idea that the only reason for the character’s death is to further the relationships of the other characters. This is part of an ongoing pattern of novelists’ wasting the lives of the characters—these lives matter because they’re not *merely* fictions. At the same time,

⁹¹ “Recent Novels,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 598 (October 1879): 559-560.

the author's incompetence is so dangerous because of her power to manage the lives of her characters, a power based, of course, on their status as fictional creations:

[B]y a mere touch of the wand of fiction to have a nice young fellow killed whom we have grown fond of, merely to deliver out of a muddle into which they have thrust themselves, a pair of idiotic lovers, is intolerable.... Nor is it any answer to say that the end desired could not have been accomplished in any other way—for what in that case is the use of the novelist, who has everything in his, or her, hands?... And when the end to be attained is nothing more important than throwing two persons temporarily estranged together, and permitting a man who is betrothed to one woman to 'gather' another into his arms and convey her thus out of the scene of danger, both art and nature are outraged.

Like others, the critic notes that the author is fully responsible for the lives of his characters, and that a sacrifice of a character's life is an injustice, especially because there is no good reason for it. The sacrifice of Jem costs the novelist quite a lot—including readers' emotional and ethical trust—and what the novelist gains is the reunion of two characters in whom "we do not feel half enough interest." It may be the case that if the trade had been balanced, if what was to be gained by Jem's death was more important, the sacrifice may have been worth it. The author's villainy, in this sense, arises not from some kind of vendetta against the character but from sheer incompetence. Nature is outraged by death, and art is outraged by the author's inability to manage his fiction more effectively. As it is, the excess of this accidental death, this sacrifice, this "uncalled-for fate"—this plot device—is met with "natural indignation."

Conclusion

The alliance between death as a plot device and the operational language so frequently used to describe it—the "killing off" of characters—is no coincidence. It is the result of the trajectory I have identified, beginning with the entrenchment of operational language in Rymer's

seventeenth-century formulation of poetic justice as the distribution of rewards and punishments. In the nineteenth century, poetic justice was transformed into a language in which readers and critics could express their demands for the treatment of their most loved and hated characters, in which the author was no longer an impartial judge or deity handing out righteous judgment but a potential villain. Moreover, authors may become villains through and because of their inability to create a coherent fictional plot; the lack of sufficient causality identifies authorial intrusion into the fictional world.

While plot theorists like Dannenberg and Newsom imply that this paradox of chance dispels the illusion of realist fiction, for Victorian critics it offers a new attitude on the fictional world and its author. Moments of authorial intervention and poetic justice, created by the absence of causality, allow the possibility of a different kind of ethics and a different kind of affect that may tie readers more even closely to the fictional world and its inhabitants. Indignant reading, then, whether expressed as “poetic justice” or in other terminology, is not only an immediate emotional response but also an ethical and aesthetic critique of how authors create their fictional worlds and plot their characters.

Chapter Two:

Out of Character

In 1895, *The Edinburgh Review* printed the following comments on George Meredith's 1885 *Diana of the Crossways*, in a larger retrospective of Meredith's novels:

Perhaps it is somewhat out of character, but, under severe pecuniary pressure, the haughty beauty, though in a moment of aberration, has sold a State secret to an enterprising journalist. It is surprising that Mr. Meredith should have made this high-souled heroine succumb to such paltry temptations as debt and the fear of distraint.... But the fact is that in the novel of 'Diana,' and notably in the discreditable and inconsistent episode of selling the secret confided to her by trusting friendship, Mr. Meredith drew upon his fancy, but not in the way we should assume. It was tolerably notorious that the prototype of the fascinating beauty of the novel was a lady who sparkled in London society, and that the admirer she betrayed was a well-known minister who held office in the Cabinet. The scene was suggested, not by facts, but by calumnies which were exposed and refuted, though for a time they obtained circulation and a certain credence.⁹²

Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* was publicly known to be inspired by the life of Caroline Norton, née Sheridan, a well-known society figure, author, and champion of women's rights, as well as Meredith's good friend. This review's objections to the part of the novel in which Diana sells a state secret suggest that the novel's representation of Caroline Norton was harmful to her character—"discreditable" and "calumnious." The reviewer goes to some length to emphasize that this incident was untrue, adding in an uncharacteristic footnote the following evidence:

We are enabled to state, and we do state from our personal knowledge, that the story is absolutely false in every particular, and that the persons thus offensively referred to had nothing to do with the matter. The intention of the Government to propose the repeal of the Corn Laws was communicated openly by Lord Aberdeen to Mr. Delane, the editor of the 'Times.' There was no sort of intrigue or bribery in the transaction.

⁹² "The Shaving of Shagpat: an Arabian Entertainment... Mr. Meredith's novels," *Edinburgh Review* 181, no. 371 (January 1895): 47-48.

Caroline Norton, the reviewer emphasizes at some length, never sold the secret in question. Later versions of the novel included the following prefatory statement:

A lady of high distinction for wit and beauty, the daughter of an illustrious Irish House, came under the shadow of calumny. It has latterly been examined and exposed as baseless. The story of Diana of the Crossways is to be read as fiction.⁹³

Depicting Caroline Norton as Diana, betrayer of state secrets, is a clear-cut case of character assassination, and one might think that declaring the novel a total fiction would resolve any concerns. But Victorian critics were equally concerned with a subtler form of character assassination in which fictional characters, rather than real people, are treated unfairly and harmed by their presentation in the text. Cosmo Monkhouse, for instance, of the *Saturday Review*, objected to the representation not of Caroline Norton, but of the fictional Diana:

She was young and impulsive, and love is blind, and the rest of it, no doubt, and that might be an excuse for it in real life; but in fiction the heroine has no right to go so very near wrecking herself on a character for whom the reader has not an atom of regard or admiration. Allowing also as historic the fact that a lady sold her friend's political secret to the *Times*, it yet seems incredible that Diana should do so....⁹⁴

While Monkhouse believes, falsely, that the “real” Diana, Caroline Norton, sold a state secret, the Diana depicted in the text could not have, not only because it contradicts her previous characterization but also because such behavior violates rules of *fictional* conduct.

The term “character assassination” combines these two forms of injustice. In its usual sense, “character assassination” refers to the harming of the content or quality of a real person's character through mud-slinging or some other harmful misrepresentation. In another sense

⁹³ Cited in Nikki Lee Manos, introduction to *Diana of the Crossways* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 14. Manos notes that the disclaimer was eliminated in many editions of the novel following Meredith's death (14n).

⁹⁴ [Cosmo Monkhouse], “Two Novels,” *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 59, no. 1534 (March 21, 1885): 389.

unique to fiction and not as widely known, “character assassination” refers to the harming of a fictional character’s character through authorial decisions about the role and identity of that character—in short, through writing a character in an “out of character” way.”⁹⁵

In this chapter, I examine Victorian evaluations of and objections to different forms of characterization as a means of understanding how and why readers become indignant over potential injustice in characterization and its implications for a theory of fiction. Victorian critics – and indeed, readers today – often use the phrase “out of character” to describe their objections to characterization in novels. The phrase “out of character” goes back at least to the mid-eighteenth century, but most (if not all) of the examples provided by the Oxford English Dictionary refer not to fictional characters but to human beings themselves acting “out of character”—that is, at variance with the part assumed or out of harmony with oneself. “In character” similarly points to the behavior of real people. If both characters and people can act “out of character,” then characters can actually act out of character in at least two distinct ways. Like people, they can act out of harmony with themselves, that is, inconsistently, but characters can also act out of character with respect to the real type of person (or persons) with whom they are understood to correspond, whether that category is woman, peasant, or lawyer.

Over the course of this chapter, I explore three distinct senses of this phrase: external or correspondent, internal or consistent, and dramatic. Objections to characterization on external

⁹⁵ The blog “Pop Culture Has Aids” identified the concept of character assassination in March 2010 as “a phenomenon unique to serial television,” defined by “altering a character’s fundamental essence for the sake of humor, plot, authorial laziness, or ineptitude.” Citing examples from *The Wire*, *Cheers*, *The Office*, *Growing Pains*, *L.A. Law*, and others, the blogger suggests that what he terms “character assassination” does not occur in books “because books are the work of one author, and that author typically stays faithful to his creations.” Television shows, on the other hand, are usually written by committees. Without disputing the point that writing-by-committee may lead more frequently to problems of characterization (or what may be perceived as problems of characterization), I argue that committee-writing is by no means that only source of this kind of dispute over character, and that books—novels—are by no means immune to this problem, as I will show throughout this chapter. In fact, the written word may present further problems of characterization because texts do not have the luxury of the human actor to provide continuity and unity to the character. “But He Would Never Do That!”, *Pop Culture Has Aids* (blog), March 2, 2010, <http://popculturehasaids.wordpress.com/2010/03/02/528/>.

grounds indicate a problem with the correspondence between the fictional world and real world it is presumably meant to represent or supplement; critiques of characterization that invoke the problem of correspondence are implicitly using what have become standard theories of mimesis and realism. Objections on internal grounds indicate a problem with internal consistency of character; in contrast to correspondence problems, such critiques identify the textuality inherent in mimetic characterization—that characters are constructed out of text. The final category of objections to characterization invokes the dramatic or theatrical sense of the phrase “out of character” in which actors speak as themselves rather than as the parts they play; this concept allows readers to distinguish between the character as *produced* in the text and the character as *represented* in the text. Odd as it may seem, this distinction is crucial for understanding authorial injustice through characterization.

While the previous chapter, “Poetic Injustice,” depends on readers distinguishing between who a character is and what happens to that character, this chapter leads to a distinction between who a character is and who the author *says* it is. Readerly indignation as a result of characterization adds complexity to the binary of agent (the author) and object (the character). When characterization is unjust, character is both agent and object; the characterization being objected to is often understood as both not belonging to the character (it is “out of character”) as well as essentially and textually inseparable from the character. The character is *made* to *act* in a certain way: object and agent. The phenomenon of perceiving injustice in characterization requires this distinction, one that is modeled on the distinction between a real human being and someone’s description of him/her but that is textually, conceptually, and philosophically far more complicated because the character has no existence outside of the textual description that both creates and performs injustice.

What readers mean when they observe that a character is behaving “out of character” is essential not only to my larger concern here, authorial injustice through characterization, but also to the relationship between the mimetic, the life-like, and the textual, the formal components of the character’s construction in a text, in readers’ understanding of characters. Indignant readers are not under the impression that characters are entirely real, independent persons living in the world—they understand that the author has created them in the text being read. “Characterization” is different from “character,” and discussion of “failed” characterization in particular necessarily focuses on the process involved in the authorial and readerly creation of characters, in both textual and mimetic modes.

External Characterization: Problems of Correspondence

In 1884, the *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* questioned whether the “curious and rather unmanly garrulousness” of one of the characters of Trollope’s *An Old Man’s Love* “is or is not true to life,” before concluding that the reviewer himself does not “think it out of character.”⁹⁶ Being untrue to life, in this review, is synonymous with being “out of character”—the way in which the character fails to correspond to some real-life model directs how the character is interpreted.

“Out of character” as “untrue to life” is one way to explain external evaluation of characterization, which comprises those modes of critiquing characterization that compare the representation and creation of characters to the real world and the real people in it. This most obviously mimetic form of characterization may entail matching the fictional world to the real

⁹⁶ “Mr. Trollope’s Last Novel,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 57, no. 1483 (March 29, 1884): 415.

world in, ideally, a one-to-one correspondence. Since fictional characters are in fact fictional (except in the cases of *romans à clef*), they are evaluated against corresponding *types* in the real world; these types can be variously defined, but often refer to a social, economic, or professional categories. In the *Saturday Review* critique of Trollope's novel, for instance, the character's garrulousness doesn't seem to fit with one type of masculinity.

If this seems like a limited view of the goals and capabilities of fiction, as a necessarily poor imitation of a fixed and untouchable real world, it should be noted that the representations in the fictional world have a bearing upon the real world as well; the failure of correspondence is sometimes understood as an injustice against the real world. For instance, reviewers of Margaret Oliphant's work often commented on how fairly, and with what level of justice or generosity, she represented Dissenting ministers, this being a cultural, social, and professional category whose representation had relatively high stakes. A reviewer in the *Examiner* notes as a defect in Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior: a Last Chronicle of Carlingford* that

[e]very Dissenter who appears in it is either a fool or a boor, or in some way distinguished for the absence of mental qualities or personal graces. All the refinement introduced belongs to the Established Church.... We are sorry for this, for a novelist should invariably hold the scales of justice evenly, which, to Mrs. Oliphant's credit, it must be admitted she has generally done.⁹⁷

This critic, and those like him/her, suggests that a Dissenting character, as a specimen of a defined type, must be portrayed in a particular manner. There is a general ethical duty to represent a group fairly, to "hold the scales of justice evenly" when it comes to the portrayal of a "type"; a distinct set of fictional characters carries the burden of a much larger real-world category. The *British Quarterly Review* similarly objects, if on a smaller scale:

⁹⁷ "Recent Novels," *The Examiner* 3568 (June 17, 1876): 688-689.

But is it right or fair to hold up the vulgar literate as a specimen of the Church of England curate furnished by the Universities, or the conceited Dissenting preacher, with his defect of speech, as a specimen of the men whom Homerton, under its learned President, Dr. Pye Smith, sent out, after a six years' training, into the Congregational ministry? It is as preposterous as it is unfair.⁹⁸

Preposterous and unfair—like the equation between “untrue to life” and “out of character,” these two terms are often seen together in correspondence evaluations of fictions and characterization. Justice and mimesis are combined into the same quality and evaluated simultaneously, as both are a question of the accuracy with which a kind of person is represented in a fiction. This becomes even clearer as the review in the *British Quarterly* continues, giving credit to one of the characters of George Eliot's *Felix Holt the Radical*:

In Rufus Lyon, George Eliot has done justice to a somewhat eccentric type of Nonconformist minister, but the majority of the best-known sketches of Nonconformity, lay or clerical, are mere caricatures by persons who know it only from the outside.⁹⁹

Just as inaccuracy is both preposterous and unfair, accuracy of representation constitutes “doing justice.”

Oliphant's injustice in her representation of a minister even expands to include injustice to a community and then injustice to human nature—this is how widely the “type” can be comprehended.

We cannot but think that here Mrs. Oliphant's lively satiric fancy carries her out of the bounds of *probability*. We believe that *she libels common human nature* in the remarkable story of how the hard-working and deservedly-popular curate becomes all at once the most suspected and despised of men. It is a proverb, that “a good man's character swears for him”; yet this good Mr. Wentworth, who is a gentleman by birth and education, and a Christian in principle and life, on what seems to us the most preposterously inadequate evidence, is supposed to be guilty of folly and sin, which, if

⁹⁸ “*Passages in the Life of Mrs. Margaret Maitland, of Sunnyside*,” *The British Quarterly Review* 98 (March 1869): 324.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 302-303.

proved against him, would deprive him of his gown. We can conceive of nothing more glaringly *absurd and disagreeable* than this portion of the “Chronicles.” The character of a minister of God is delicate as a woman’s, and ought not to be breathed upon.... *In real life*, we believe that the accusation would never be made, or if made by vulgar and credited by silly persons, would be strongly repudiated by every man and woman blessed with a grain of common sense. But what does Mrs. Oliphant represent as the *probable* course of action in such a community as Carlingford? She represents him as universally condemned!¹⁰⁰ [emphasis added]

Here, as above, apparent inaccuracy of representation is understood as improbability and absurdity when compared to the real world. Note, too, the ambiguity of the phrase “the character of a minister of God is delicate as a woman’s, and ought not to be breathed upon”: does the reviewer mean that in the fictional world, fictional characters ought not to treat carelessly the character of fictional ministers? Or does he mean that the character of a minister is so delicate that the *author* ought not to treat carelessly the fictional representation of one? This ambiguity results from evaluation of fiction in terms of external, or correspondent, standards of characterization. If the representation of a minister can perform injustice on the clergy or Christians in general, then the author’s representation of other fictional characters harming a fictional minister’s reputation can be elided with the author’s harming that group herself.

Of course, not all categories or types are as well-defined or high-stakes as a minister, whether Dissenting or Anglican. Often times, reviewers seek out a number of more loosely-defined categories against which to measure the correspondence of the characterization. For instance, a review of Charles Reade’s *White Lies* objects to the probability of an action based upon a social categorization of the character:

It would be inconceivable, indeed, that an English girl of Josephine’s general moral caliber, and so highly bred, should be guilty of such an impropriety as a clandestine marriage with an old love, almost immediately upon hearing the news of her husband’s

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 309.

death in the battle, before that news is authentically confirmed, and (as she had been previously holding a sentimental intercourse with the old love) under circumstances peculiarly dangerous to her honour. The pretext of doing the misdeed for her lover's sake, not for her own, would not blind any woman of sense.¹⁰¹

It is not a question of what Josephine, a particular character who does not exist, fictionally did or did not do, at least not in this particular review. But, this review asserts, we can make predictions about someone like Josephine: someone with “general moral caliber,” an “English girl,” “highly bred,” and so forth.

Making judgments about the real-world correspondents of characters is a common way to understand realism, among both lay readers and scholars. Some philosophers suggest that when we emote toward or about fictional characters, we're actually experiencing emotions about real people *like* those characters or real situations like those depicted. As Colin Radford explains the argument, “if and when we weep for Anna Karenina we weep for the pain and anguish that a real person might suffer and which real persons have suffered, and if her situation were not of that sort we should not be moved.”¹⁰² Radford, however, like a number of other philosophers, rejects this reasoning:

For we do not really weep for the pain that a real person might suffer, and which real persons have suffered, when we weep for Anna Karenina, even if we should not be moved by her story if it were not of that sort. We weep for *her*. We are moved by what happens to her, by the situation she gets into, and which is a pitiful one, but we do not feel pity for her state or fate, or her history or her situation, or even for others, *i.e.*, for real persons who might have or even have had such a history. We pity her, feel for her and out tears are shed for her.

¹⁰¹ “*White Lies*,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 5, no. 119 (February 6, 1858): 138.

¹⁰² Colin Radford, “How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?: Part I,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 4 (1975): 74-75.

Just as this interpretation of emoting toward fiction is problematic (and most theorists move on to seek other explanations), so too is reading characters as correspondents of real-world types insufficient. Certainly, readers and literary critics do it, measuring characters against various real-world measures, but most of the time, they do so simultaneously with other measures—in particular, internal or consistent evaluations of characterization.

Internal Characterization: Problems of Consistency

He is neither exactly a bad fellow (though perhaps the brutality of his actual desertion of his wife is a very little out of character even for so light and selfish a person), nor exactly a fool, nor exactly a cad, nor exactly a commonplace man.¹⁰³

George Saintsbury's 1890 account of one particular fictional character is representative of an ongoing attempt to fit a character into pre-existing categories of being; unlike the other reviews described above, though, Saintsbury mostly fails to locate the character into a set of possible types. This character *is not* a bad fellow, he *is* light, he *is* selfish, he *is not* exactly commonplace, he *is not* a fool or a cad – but he *does* an act of desertion. While this may be an attempt to evaluate the character through a correspondence theory of character, it is also an attempt to evaluate him on the grounds of consistency, or internal standards of characterization—a horizontal demand in contrast to the vertical correspondence described by external characterization. Victorian critics made both judgments simultaneously, and it can be difficult to distinguish between them.

Objections to characterization on external and internal grounds seem to indicate that characters are understood in a mimetic sense, are understood to be like real people. It may be

¹⁰³ George Saintsbury, "New Novels," *Academy* 947 (June 29, 1890): 439.

true of both humans and fictional characters that we use two distinct schemas to generate expectations about their behavior. As Richard J. Gerrig and David W. Allbritton note, human beings use either category-based or person-based representations when we evaluate one another, depending on whether we conceptualize an individual as a member of a particular social category with a defined set of norms, or whether we understand that individual to be a unique instance, in which case we have only our history of that individual to help us generate norms and expectations.¹⁰⁴ Readers, in turn, when evaluating characters like real people, may use category-based or person-based schema to judge characterization, a distinction that corresponds to my categories of external and internal measures of characterization.

Because measuring a human being's consistency is different from measuring a character's consistency, however, we should distinguish between applying a person-based schema to a person and applying it to a character, in which case it would become a character-based schema. While measuring characters against categories of reality and measuring a character's consistency and coherence both rely on some basic reference to real people, one form of evaluation is explicitly and directly mimetic and referential, while the other is textual, based on previous textual descriptions of definitions of character presented in the text, and self-referential. The one, constituting a failure of realism, is an offense against the real world—readers are offended because some group, the clergy, has been misrepresented through the character in question—while the other is an offense against the fictional world, as readers are offended because the character itself is misrepresented.

The requirement of consistency or coherence is, of course, based on some basic mimetic demands of personhood—Seymour Chatman notes that the “verisimilar consistency of

¹⁰⁴ Richard J. Gerrig and David W. Allbritton, “The Construction of Literary Character: A View from Cognitive Psychology,” *Literary Character*, ed. John V. Knapp (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 37.

characters... is the cornerstone of fiction, at least of the fictional variety”¹⁰⁵—but the way we imagine, attribute, and judge that consistency is at the crux of how a series of signs becomes a mimetic person, how otherwise discrete traits, actions, and descriptors create the illusion of a continuous human-like figure. There are times when an action, event, thought, trait, or comment is simply rejected by readers as out of character, while the wholeness of the character continues to be perceived. The judgment that a character is acting “out of character” is a rejection of one aspect of textual or authorial authority, while other aspects remain authoritative; but it is also an acknowledgement of that author—it must be rejected *because* it is authorized. So how and why do readers (whether amateur or professional) reject certain aspects of characterization?

In Saintsbury’s review, quoted above, that single action—the act of desertion—can be understood as out of character in terms of the consistency of the character created over the course of the narrative, just as it can be understood in terms of correspondence to the type of man represented in the narrative. (The difference between creation and representation is crucial if slippery, as I argue below.) Saintsbury finds “out of character” in a distinct act, an act that is parenthetical but pointed when surrounded by descriptions of his nature, his essence—that is, character traits. This judgment is based on a reading of this character’s nature over the course of the text, an ongoing attempt to fit him into pre-existing categories of being. Incidents, though performed *by* the character, can be found uncharacteristic; “is,” perhaps, trumps “does.” In fact, in addition to “is” and “does,” we can identify a third category of character information: “says” – the author says. Following scholars who have examined the process of characterization in depth, I distinguish between character traits, character actions, and direct characterization statements—that is, direct descriptive statements made by the implied author or narrator.

¹⁰⁵ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 122.

Uri Margolin and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan have produced the most detailed descriptions of the process of characterization; both propose hierarchical structures in which character data is categorized into traits, and traits are interrelated into “a unified stable constellation,” in Margolin’s words.¹⁰⁶ This character data consists in the other two categorizes that I propose we compare with traits: character actions, which include acts, contemplated acts, acts of omission, thoughts, and speech acts,¹⁰⁷ and direct characterization statements.¹⁰⁸ Acts themselves are not immediate data, but must be identified and categorized—a complex series of interpretive acts—before they can serve as signifiers of character. These interpretive processes include, as Margolin describes, the identification of the act, its components, its context, the relationship between all three, the attribution of properties (like intentions, desires, hopes, manner, or style) to an act globally and locally (to each of its components), and eventually, the attribution of properties to the character (or actant) on the basis of the properties of the act and its components. Moreover, readers also follow cultural codes (frames or scripts) and behavioral maxims and norms to interpret and reconstruct narrative acts and situations in addition to generic or text-specific codes.¹⁰⁹ The fact that there are so many opportunities for interpretative disagreement in this process, which may *seem* to be almost instantaneous or automatic, is just one of the reasons why readerly indignation tends to be idiosyncratic.

¹⁰⁶ Uri Margolin, “The Doer and the Deed: Action as a Basis for Characterization in Narrative,” *Poetics Today* 7, no. 2 (1986): 205.

¹⁰⁷ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 61-62.

¹⁰⁸ The exemplary direct characterization statement is that made in a third-person novel with an omniscient narrator. First-person narrated novels, however, also have direct characterization statements, both about the narrating character and about other characters; in such cases, these “direct” characterization statements *also* constitute “actions” (speech actions) from which information about the speaker can be inferred. In some cases, even third-person direct characterization statements can imply traits about the implied author.

¹⁰⁹ Margolin, 209-210, 213.

Traits, actions, and direct characterization statements are not parallel units. Traits are not primary signifiers, as Margolin notes; rather, they “presuppose other representational elements, such as actions, events and settings which are more fundamental as regards the ontology of the narrative universe.”¹¹⁰ They can be inferred by the reader from actions (a single action or multiple), extrapolated from direct characterization statements (or provided directly by them), or inferred from the model of some kind of real-life corresponding type or person. Rimmon-Kenan points out that action and speech imply traits through a cause-and-effect relationship that is inferred in reverse: Maggie Tulliver neglects to feed her brother’s pet rabbits, so we know that she is occasionally thoughtless or foolish—and she neglects to feed the rabbits *because* she is occasionally thoughtless or foolish. Moreover, there is a wide range of literary devices that texts can use to imply character information; Rimmon-Kenan suggests that texts can use metonymy or a relationship of spatial contiguity, as when a description of a character’s house or dress indicates a particular character trait (the house or dress not only connotes a particular trait but may also result from it).¹¹¹

Discontinuities in characterization arise when a reader decides that traits, actions, or direct characterization statements do not cohere with either the traits of the character that the reader has already predicated and stabilized (especially if these are traits felt to be “basic and enduring”) or new traits, actions, or direct characterization statements. Although actions and direct characterization statements are the building blocks to the crucial step of creating a character constituted by traits, my reading of Victorian literary reviews suggests that readers consider traits, actions, and direct characterization statements at the same time—and thus we as

¹¹⁰ Margolin, 206.

¹¹¹ Rimmon-Kenan, 65.

critics should also consider them simultaneously. Despite their lack of equivalence—traits are second-order data—when they conflict, it is not necessarily the case that any one form of information is more authoritative than another. A single action may be interpreted against a trait that was inferred from any number of processes; an action can be contrasted with a direct characterization statement; and so on. An inferred trait may carry less weight than action by virtue of its being inferred rather than “witnessed,” but witnessed actions can constitute unjust authorial writing.

In a review from 1876, the critic of *Academy* rejects an action as out of character:

One other matter is, we doubt, not quite so truly in keeping with the character, and that is the considerable number of times in the course of the narrative when the young lady relieves herself with a good quiet cry. An outbreak of the sort, under rare and exceptional strain, now and then, would be natural enough, but not in the case of a constitutionally equable temperament brought in contact with minor worries.¹¹²

A character action that is habitual is rejected as uncharacteristic precisely because it *is* habitual, even though we might think that behavior repeatedly described would in fact work to constitute the character. But it is contrasted with a definition of the character as having a “constitutionally equable temperament” – the terms “constitutionally” and “temperament” both emphasize that these are enduring traits, while apparently enduring behavior can be rejected as uncharacteristic. Rimmon-Kenan suggests that traits may be implied by one-time actions as well as by habitual actions, and that these can have different implications for how the behavior is interpreted:

Although a one-time action does not reflect *constant* qualities, it is not less characteristic of the character. On the contrary, its dramatic impact often suggests that the traits it reveals are qualitatively more crucial than the numerous habits which represent the character’s routine.¹¹³

¹¹² Richard F. Littledale, “New Novels,” *Academy* 216 (June 24, 1876): 605.

¹¹³ Rimmon-Kenan, 61.

Similarly, part of what is objectionable in the *Academy* review is the “minor worries” that lead to the character’s tears—there is a sense of excess to this behavior, which, as described in the previous chapter, is commonly identified in accounts of authorial manipulation.

In a review of Oliphant’s *John*, the critic of the *Saturday Review* objects to the characterization of Kate, based on a judgment of which aspects of the character are essential and which aren’t. Behavior that seems to contradict these non-contingent qualities is considered faulty:

All the action between Mr. Crediton and Fred Huntley was neither probable nor honourable; as little likely was Kate’s flight to Fanshawe Regis; or, granting this, her father’s easy forgiveness. He had evidently made up his mind to dislike John Mitford under all circumstances; and this flagrant opposition to his wishes, this public flying in the face of his parental authority, could scarcely have made matters better. And, foolish and thoughtless as Kate was, could she innocently have persisted in accepting Fred’s attentions to such a point as they reached? Though light and a flirt, she is meant to be pure and innocent; yet in this episode with Fred Huntley she sails a little too near the wind for our taste, and not all Mrs. Oliphant’s skill can wash her quite as white as she should be.¹¹⁴

Ethical and aesthetic objects are mixed together in the question of probability (what “would actually” have happened), and probability is determined by both external considerations of the real world as well as internal considerations of the nature of the characters. Kate seems to have an apparently established essence (note the number of adjectives here: foolish, thoughtless, light, and a flirt – but also pure and innocent), compared to a (mostly) singular action; it is the action that becomes the problem.

When a detail does not fit into the constructed categories or runs counter to them, readers can respond in several different ways. First, the reader may decide that her reading was mistaken and alter her conception of the character. Second, the reader may decide that the character has

¹¹⁴ “*John*,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 30, no. 783 (October 29, 1870): 571.

changed or grown and again alter her conception of the character to include this growth. The third possibility, unmentioned in most accounts of the process of characterization, the reader may judge the new information to be an authorial mistake and refuse to alter her conception of the character. The author's authority must be rejected. In the review of *John*, the duplicity of character leads to disappointment in the author. The critic refers, in his indignation, to Oliphant's overall design and intention; in contrast to the "would have" of the "real" Kate are the intentions of Oliphant. Kate *would not have* innocently persisted in accepting Fred's attentions—and yet in the world of the fiction, she did, with all its consequences: she is no longer as "white" as she should be. Oliphant's authority is both accepted and qualified, as even Oliphant cannot wash her "white" again, as a result of Oliphant's own plotting and also in contrast to Oliphant's intentions and design (she "is meant to be" pure and innocent).

A reviewer of Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior* similarly blames the author for an unacceptable characterization. In this case, the problem is a change in characterization over two novels: Mr. Tozer appeared first in *Salem Chapel* (1863) and again in *Phoebe Junior* (1876). Serially recurring characters might seem like a rich source of characterization critiques, but perhaps surprisingly, many Victorian critics tended to withhold judgment (or at least public judgment) on characters in works that were being published serially or in parts. A reviewer of *Middlemarch*, for instance, explicitly notes his decision to hold off on commenting on Eliot's characters: "We must reserve all account of the structure and criticism of the characters until the story is further developed."¹¹⁵ Likewise, a critic of *Bleak House* declares, "we will say nothing:--for the very good reason that we feel we can speak of them more safely when we *know* what place Mr.

¹¹⁵ "Middlemarch, a Story of Provincial Life," *The British Quarterly Review* 55 (January 1872): 267.

Dickens means to assign to them in the movement of his story.”¹¹⁶ *The Athenaeum* even declares that “it would be unfair to pronounce any judgment upon a tale of which but one part has appeared.”¹¹⁷ Characters recurring over several novels, though, may be open to such judgments.

In *Phoebe Junior*, the critic of *The Saturday Review* writes, Mr. Tozer’s

pitiable breakdown must be resented by all who remember him as the most conspicuous and telling character in Salem Chapel.... To see him here, the leading member and, as she terms it, arch-deacon of that grave community, giving way to foaming passion, and actually swearing, as he vows vengeance on the miscreant who had set his, Tozer’s, name to an accommodation bill, outrages all our ideas. A well-conducted Nonconformist knows how to be angry and vindictive without committing himself in this disgraceful fashion. And the old man has become mean, vulgar, and sycophantic to boot. Indeed all the satire of the author takes this direction.¹¹⁸

The general objection to a character’s qualities (we may dislike a mean or vulgar character in the same way that we may dislike a mean or vulgar person) does not necessarily qualify as indignant reading, but the contrast with his representation in the previous novel and this reviewer’s “resentment” suggest an objection to the author’s treatment of the character. (This is partially inspired by an external evaluation of characterization—Mr. Tozer may be read as a representative of all Nonconformists in the real world, and thus his characterization has bearing on that real world, as suggested by the use of the word “satire.”)

The reviewer goes on to place his indignation directly at the feet of Oliphant: “This is perhaps a view likely to press itself on feminine observation, and is convenient here as developing the ambitious and resources of the spirited heroine.” This last line accuses Oliphant of manipulating the plot and characters of her novel for the “convenience” of developing her

¹¹⁶ “*Bleak House* No. I,” *Athenaeum* 1271 (March 6, 1852): 271.

¹¹⁷ “Our Library Table,” *Athenaeum* 2512 (December 18, 1875): 829.

¹¹⁸ “*Phoebe Junior*,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 42, no. 1082 (July 22, 1876): 112-113.

heroine; wrong is being done not only to Nonconformists in the real world but to her fictional Nonconformists as well, including Tozer, who “has become mean, vulgar, and sycophantic.” Indeed, this reviewer further accuses Oliphant of “manipulating” situations to better represent her heroine: “She seizes every point of the situation, brings out every violent contrast and awkward collision, confronts her heroine with the worst a lively imagination can conjure up to confound her hopes and quell her spirit...”¹¹⁹

This critic is certainly not the only one to distrust the author. A reviewer of R. D. Blackmore’s *Alice Lorraine* objects to the conflict between authorial direct characterization and character action. Discussing Lady Valeria, the critic writes:

We are told she is courtly, and her outward appearance accords with that character; but a dame of her pretensions could not consistently have tolerated such a boor as Sir Remnant Chapman, though her indifference to her grand-daughter’s sentiments on marriage is probably natural enough.¹²⁰

This critic does not exactly give faith to one form of characterization over the other, merely noting the conflict. But the “we are told” suggests a lack of faith in authorial characterization as misreporting. On the other hand, she “could not” have tolerated Sir Remnant – so did she? The fiction has apparently become impossible.

This lack of faith in direct characterization is by no means unique. But Margolin notes that in many types of narratives, those in which the implied author is conventionally regarded as reliable, his/her direct characterizations are “consistent, complete, absolutely correct, and not open to any doubt, even if he does not present any evidences for his CSs [characterization

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 113.

¹²⁰ “Open! Sesame!” *Athenaeum* 2479 (May 1, 1875): 583.

statements]” and can be used as touchstones for other characterizations of the same character.¹²¹ She describes the information relayed by direct characterization as “undeniable.”¹²² Rimmon-Kenan, too, suggests that what she calls “direct definition” (equivalent to Margolin’s direct characterization) is more authoritative than indirect presentation (including actions from which traits can be inferred).¹²³

But the examples I have discussed indicate that this is not the whole picture. I have suggested that actions (and other indirect presentations of character) can indeed be evaluated as holding equal authority to direct characterization statements. In fact, direct characterization statements may hold varying levels of authority. In some cases, to be sure, it is most authoritative; otherwise, most realist third-person narrated novels could hardly exist, for they depend upon a narrator’s account of the main characters at the commencement of the text. Margolin describes three categories of characterization statements: statements about dynamic mimetic elements (verbal, mental, or physical acts of characters); statements about static mimetic elements (name, appearance, customs, habits); and statements about formal textual patterns (the grouping of characters, analogies, parallels, or contrasts, repetitions or gradations, and other stylistic features associated with their presence).¹²⁴ The distinction between the first two is particularly important; it is rare that readers object to authors’ characterizing statements about static mimetic elements, or at least not elements like name and appearance. Some statements,

¹²¹ Margolin, 223.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ “Definition is akin to generalization and conceptualization. It is also both explicit and supra-temporal. Consequently, its dominance in a given text is liable to produce a rational, authoritative and static impression. This impression may be alleviated if the definitions seem to emerge gradually from concrete details, or are immediately exemplified by specific behavior, or presented together with other means of characterization.” See Rimmon-Kenan, 58-60.

¹²⁴ Margolin, 206.

then, have almost total authority; when a character is introduced as, say, “dark-haired” or a “lawyer,” most readers will probably accept these characterization statements. Others, however, may hold much less weight. The author of *Alice Lorraine* made a direct characterization statement that Lady Valeria is “courtly”; this is apparently a direct characterization statement that can be wrong or mistaken, a judgment rather than a fiat, at least once contradictory evidence has come into play.

Evaluation and Creation

When Rimmon-Kenan and Margolin describe the reader’s freedom to object to or disagree with the implied author’s characterizations, they both seem to be referring to the implied author’s *judgment on* the character. But I have suggested that readers sometimes distinguish between direct characterization statements as evaluations and direct characterization statements as creation. How can we distinguish between injustice *in the creation* of character and injustice *against* the character that one has created?

An author like Trollope will often explicitly demarcate his reports to his readers about character and his own judgments on that character, saying things like, “For my part, I think he was right to do so” of some particular action. This is clearly an evaluation of a character that, for the moment at least, seems to exist outside that evaluation. But when an author says something like, “Rosamond was a shallow creature,” is this evaluation and judgment, or is it characterization? Is that author simply making an evaluation of an ostensibly objective creature, or is that author actually, with that statement, positing the character *as* shallow?

It must be acknowledged that the two can come to be quite similar—even, in some cases, indistinguishable. But the unfairness of a judgment by an author is significantly different from

the unfairness of characterization by an author; in the one case, the author's judgment may be unfair the way anybody's judgment may be unfair, including other readers or other characters, while in the other, the injustice is of a form entirely unique to the fictional situation. The problem is more than just an unreliable narrator or even unreliable implied author, which, in Margolin's terms, is when the reader's "judgment or interpretation of the reported acts and the inferences we draw from them diverge from the reporter's, and we insist ours are the correct or better ones."¹²⁵ Sometimes it is not judgment and interpretation that is disagreed with; authorial judgment can be constitutive, can *make it happen*, and it can be the happening that a reader objects to.

This distinction is explicitly struggled with in a review of Oliphant's *May*, which quotes the passage in question before discussing it: "'But it's no the leddy, it's the woman I think of,' Radical Jock explained to himself—an explanation as false as most of such explanations are." The *Blackwood's* critic writes:

The authoress is privileged, of course, in a way which no reader can possibly be, to know the real sentiments of her characters; but we cannot help thinking that Jock, Radical as he is, suffers from a somewhat uncharitable interpretation. The woman and the 'laddy' are very difficult to separate in such cases by any logical or metaphysical division, even in the mind of a Scotchman and radical.¹²⁶

The critic struggles with the conflict between the fact of the author's privilege and power to know and even create her characters' thoughts and his disagreement with her interpretation and general sentiment. Ultimately, the critic seems to conclude that Oliphant is using her privilege unfairly—"uncharitably"—according to the critic's own evaluation of the character.

A review of *Middlemarch* may help elucidate the differences between these two forms of authorial injustice, despite their similarity. The critic of *The British Quarterly Review* objects, as

¹²⁵ Margolin, 221.

¹²⁶ "Mrs. Oliphant's Novels," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 113, no. 692 (June 1873): 730.

many have, to the attitude of *Middlemarch*'s implied author toward Rosamond. Evincing what I have called "rebellious identification,"¹²⁷ the reviewer writes, speaking of the passages in which Rosamond begins to fall in love with Lydgate:

The reader is even a little disposed at this time to resent the author's evident scorn for Rosamond, and almost take her part against the critic who seems to have hardened her heart against her own creation.¹²⁸

This "evident scorn" is presumably inferred from authorial commentary about the character, not commentary *producing* the character. The critic goes on, however, to say that "the picture becomes painfully real and convincing" as Rosamond can neither give Lydgate her sympathy nor entirely "turn her heart away from him."¹²⁹ He also describes Eliot's "view" of Rosamond "as one of those persons of whom in this world it is hopeless to expect anything like spiritual growth" – the word "view" would indicate that it is an attitude, but not constitutive. Indeed, he contrasts this "view" with Rosamond's own behavior:

But it is an assumption to which our author herself is hardly quite true, for she does give us one glimpse of Rosamond's reawakening tenderness toward her husband, and makes Dorothea win a complete victory over her...¹³⁰

The idea that Eliot is not true to her own assumption calls attention to the oddness or even hypocrisy of the fact that Eliot is responsible for both contradictory ideas—first, the attitude strongly implied that Rosamond is incapable of spiritual growth (a form of characterization statement), and second, the small growth Rosamond apparently experiences during her evening with Dorothea (an action). The critic here uses two different kinds of verbs for the fictional

¹²⁷ Lesley Goodman, "Rebellious Identification, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Arabella," *Narrative* 18, vol. 2 (May 2010): 163-178.

¹²⁸ "*Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*," *The British Quarterly Review* 114 (April 1873): 419.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 419.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 425.

process: Eliot “gives us one glimpse,” suggesting that the author has indeed special access to fictional characters that nonetheless exist outside of her—her power is the power of revelation—and Eliot “makes” Dorothea win that victory, suggesting that the author has ultimate control of what happens to the characters (this particular language is discussed in greater detail in the following section).

This critic then goes on to suggest that even without this diegetic glimpse of Rosamond experiencing spiritual growth, Eliot’s comment would still be inappropriate given the critic’s interpretation of Rosamond and human nature in general: “[N]or are we willing to believe that a nature even so shallow and limited as Rosamond’s should have wholly failed to be warmed into something like appreciation of her husband’s hasty but generous tenderness.” We might say that one form of characterization statement is pitted against another – or perhaps characterization is here being measured against a real-world model of shallow people.

This “view” of George Eliot’s of a Rosamond incapable of spiritual growth is not only a general impression, but an opinion inferred from Eliot’s comment about Rosamond’s second marriage in the epilogue of the novel. The critic’s comment on the nature of this act is significant:

Is there not something of the painter’s temptation to deepen unduly the most characteristic lines in a picture in the last touches he gives to it—in order to leave a distincter and stronger effect on the spectator’s mind—in this brilliant but bitter farewell to Rosamond?¹³¹

Eliot’s authorial decision that Rosamond remarry is both authoritative and non-authoritative. If Eliot is the painter, it is clear that she has full control over its creation. But the deepening of “the characteristic lines,” it is also implied, is an untruthful act. This language is similar to that used

¹³¹ Ibid., 425.

in a critique of Oliphant, quoted above: “She seizes every point of the situation, brings out every violent contrast and awkward collision, confronts her heroine with the worst a lively imagination can conjure up to confound her hopes and quell her spirit.”¹³² The idea here is that Eliot, in telling us of Rosamond’s second marriage, is being truthful to her own judgment of Rosamond but not to Rosamond herself as she is elsewhere portrayed. Moreover, the fact that this occurs in the epilogue, referred to only briefly and taking place long after the main diegetic time frame, suggests that it doesn’t have as much authority as those earlier acts of characterization, especially that so crucial evening with Dorothea.

Similarly, the critic also rejects the epilogue’s account of Lydgate:

And with regard to Lydgate, though we can easily believe that his final relinquishment of his higher scientific aims might have left such depths of bitterness in him as would break out in the speech about his basil plant, that could hardly have been all. He must have felt even in his solitude that ‘the meanness of opportunity’ which had crushed his ideal ambition in one direction, had opened to him an ideal of an even higher kind in the renunciations he had willingly embraced for the sake of others; and to leave him without a word as to the softer brightness which this humbler but nobler life must have brought him, is to leave him in needless gloom. George Eliot not unnaturally attributes too much moral influence to opportunity, because she ignores the fountain of light which is alone independent of opportunity.¹³³

The critic thus entirely rejects what he sees as the simplicity of these final accounts of the characters—“that could hardly have been all”—in the conditional language common to such critiques of characterization, implying the partial use of a correspondence evaluation of characterization. He even fills in his own, perhaps more morally optimistic ending for Lydgate, one in which Lydgate partially makes peace with his marriage and his failed dreams because of the moral benefit that arises from sacrifice. Interestingly, however, despite maintaining that Eliot

¹³² “*Phoebe Junior*,” *Saturday Review*, 113.

¹³³ “*Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*,” *The British Quarterly Review* 114 (April 1873): 425.

is actually inaccurate about what Lydgate “must have felt,” the critic still charges her with “leav[ing] him in needless gloom,” which is an act of commission. And when she attributes too much moral influence to opportunity, she may do so both in her evaluation of the characters and their lives and in her constitutive conclusions to those lives—both attributing too much influence and *giving* too much influence.

The plots described in the epilogue have apparently liminal status. On the one hand, they indicate Eliot’s views of her characters, which can be shown, apparently, to be incorrect both through contrasting textual evidence from the main part of the novel as well as through common-sense character inference, but on the other hand, they indicate authorial decisions, which have weight no matter how much a reader may object to their morality or probability. This misrepresentation of Lydgate’s life after the close of the main part of the novel has important bearing on him; because Eliot, artistically deepening the characteristic touches of her portraits, chooses her final words about Lydgate to be cynical and bitter, Lydgate himself is left in gloom, left to be cynical and bitter—and too is the reader left in gloom. The final touch of characterization itself is not only cruel but unfair, for Lydgate, according to this critic, need not be so bitter and cynical.

Margolin concludes that the reader is the “ultimate authority,” despite the reliability of authorial characterization statements. A reader can reject an implied author’s “analysis” of the agent, “due to a difference in norms, psychological rules, concepts, and models between reader and implied author,” while continuing to “accept as true and complete the ‘implied’ author’s reports about the acts of a NA [narrative agent, or character].”¹³⁴ I would add, though, that readers may also go on to reject those reports, or even the plotting itself, just as a character’s out-

¹³⁴ Margolin, 223.

of-character actions can be the fault of the implied author rather than the character's own human-like inconsistency. Margolin notes that this rejection of traits is likely to happen if the act is of brief duration, and her hypothetical reader interprets these qualities as "a freak, accident, slip, etc."¹³⁵ This interpretation of interpretation is treating characters like people, with "out of character" behavior understood on the model of how a real human being can act "out of character": an accident, a slip, behavior that does not impinge on a person's actual identity. When a person acts out of character, that person is the only one responsible for her odd behavior; when a character does, sometimes we impute responsibility to the author.

The Language of Force

Readers, from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first (and possibly before and after), have often had a curious and hitherto unexamined way of disapprovingly discussing authors' use of this power; they describe characters as being *forced* or *made* to behave or even think a certain way by the author. This language of force is a variant of the operational language discussed in the previous chapter, in which authors have the power to, for example, kill their characters, intervening in the fictional plane. There is a difference between the two, though. When plot is punishment, readers describe the plot as something happening to a passive character; the character is punished by something outside of his fictional control, like a sudden destructive storm. When characterization is objectionable, reader might describe the author as making a character *do* something or *want to do* something. The character is both agent and object, then, in such discussions.

¹³⁵ Margolin, 217.

When such language is used, it often registers the difficult position of readers who object to characterization, both rejecting that characterization and forced to accept it. For instance, a reviewer of Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior* joined the ranks of those critics objecting to Oliphant's portrayal of non-Anglican clergymen:

...when Mrs. Oliphant makes a clergyman, respected in his own town, a man of family, intellectual, a writer of "thoughtful papers" in religious periodicals, considered to have a deep knowledge of the human heart, and preaching better sermons than any other clergyman at Carlingford, commit a forgery merely to get himself out of an ordinary money difficulty, and then think no more about it till the day of discovery comes—going on to spend the money that comes into his hands in small extravagance, culminating in a handsome bookcase for his study—we must take exception to the probability of the transaction.¹³⁶

Oliphant "makes" the clergyman commit forgery—it is not his choice, in this reviewer's conception of him, but the nature of the text dictates that we can't deny that he did it. This behavior is deemed out of character because on the one hand, it does not fit with a series of past behaviors and traits considered defining, and on the other hand, there is not sufficient motivation for it—the forgery was "*merely* to get himself out of an *ordinary* money difficulty" (emphasis added). As I describe in the previous chapter, gratuitousness, excess, or insufficient motivation are all features that lead readers to understand plot as punishment; here too they are the sign of authorial intervention.

Oliphant has the power not only to make the clergyman do something (commit the forgery) but also power over his thoughts—to make him "think no more" about something. This is a common account of fiction by readers. In the eighteenth century, in her lengthy correspondence with Samuel Richardson (also discussed in the previous chapter), Lady Bradshaigh asks Richardson to change Lovelace for her. She refers to Richardson "mak[ing] him

¹³⁶ "Phoebe Junior," *Saturday Review* 42, no. 1082 (July 22, 1876): 112-113.

so wicked, and yet so agreeable,”¹³⁷ and in response to his many objections to the possibility of a happy marriage between Clarissa and Lovelace, she writes in a later letter that were she the author she would “have changed Lovelace into that man capable of sharing with Clarissa what I call this world’s perfect happiness.”¹³⁸ This, of course, is a wish, a hope to take advantage of the author’s unique power (a not uncommon sentiment in Victorian discourse)—here, the power of the author to “make” or “force” may be understood as the power of the author to shape the fictional universe (and to shape his fictional characters) to the most beneficent (or to the most pleasurable) ends.

A similar case can be found in a review of Trollope’s *The Duke’s Children*, in which the critic warns that authorial force disturbs the aesthetic and emotional force of the novel:

The only person in the book for whom any real sympathy can be felt is Lady Mabel Grex. With all her faults she is womanly, and has to endure real suffering. Treagear’s treatment of her is as cruel as it is unnatural. Moreover, it seems to us as much a mistake to make Lady Mabel so far forget herself as to actually ask Lord Silverbridge to marry her, as to afterwards allow her to tell him that she never loved him. Yet, despite these blemishes in her character, the sympathies of most readers will be with Lady Mabel, especially as she is the only person in the book who is left sorrowing.¹³⁹

In this critic’s view of the novel, its design demands a heroine who can garner readerly sympathy. While her own continual suffering encourages this, Trollope may run into problems when he “makes her” commit an impropriety and perhaps a cruelty, behavior that could limit the sympathy she might otherwise earn.

Moreover, the author doesn’t merely “make” Lady Mabel ask Lord Silverbridge to marry her – he makes Lady Mabel forget herself enough to do so. Some of the agency is hers, but the

¹³⁷ Belfour [Lady Bradshaigh] to Richardson, October 10, 1748, *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, 4:180.

¹³⁸ Belfour [Lady Bradshaigh] to Richardson, January 11, 1749, *Correspondence*, 4:245.

¹³⁹ “*The Duke’s Children*,” *Examiner* 3775 (June 5, 1880): 700.

uneasy feelings her behavior leads to in would-be sympathetic readers are the fault of the author for making her behave in this way, as though the author were the parent of a recalcitrant child. Indeed, in many cases the “force” of the author is seen as an imposition of an author abusing his authority—an author who does not have the right to make characters do what they don’t want to do, however a reader might imagine that.

A reviewer of *The Crisis*, an adaptation of Pierre Berton’s *La Rencontre*, puts it clearly when he writes, “What we may legitimately resent is his forcing his creations to behave out of character.” The paradox is right there: he (apparently Berton, not the adapter, Rudolf Besier) can *make* his own creations behave *out of character*. The verbs of this review are intriguing:

Thus he takes great pains to picture Camille, a much-enduring wife just widowed, as a woman of principle and fastidious virtue, yet shows her unable to think of any better way to prevent a man she loves, but has hitherto checked, her friend Renee’s husband, from discovering his wife’s treachery than by declaring her regard for him and surrendering herself to his passion. There is, to be sure, as a sequel to this mad act of self-sacrifice, an effective scene of recrimination between the two women, and M. Berton provides a telling tableau when he makes Camille, with a confession of the lovers’ guilt in her hands, unable to ‘give away’ her friend. But the trickery of the playwright is too obvious.¹⁴⁰

The verbs of representation here – “picture” and “shows” – suggest that the author’s (or, in this case, playwright’s) job is merely to reveal the character. While this might be checked by the fact that the playwright takes “great pains” to do so, suggesting the artifice involved, the fact that he shows her “unable to think” moves authorial agency even further away from character agency. But *making her* “unable to ‘give away’ her friend” locates that agency back in the author and suggests that the author is using an unfair or inappropriate power, something done against the will of the character; in contrast, *showing her* unable to do something is merely revealing that

¹⁴⁰ “New—*The Crisis*. Adapted from ‘La Rencontre’ of Pierre Berton by Rudolf Besier,” *Athenaeum* 4324 (September 10, 1910): 303-304.

character. The force is the playwright's "trickery"—a word for that kind of authorial manipulation readers and consumers often gesture toward or complain of without necessarily being able to pinpoint what makes it manipulative.

Dramatic Characterization

It is only by understanding the language of force and the difference between evaluation and creation that can we understand the third, most understated form of characterization: dramatic characterization. The first sense in which characters can be describe as "out of character," as I describe above, refers to an apparent misalignment or failure of correspondence between fiction and reality, and the second sense refers to a failure of consistency over the course of the text. The third sense we might initially disregard as inapplicable to the discussion of written fiction; in its literal meaning, it applies only to drama, but I argue that we can extend it to all forms of fiction, regardless of whether the fictional characters are portrayed by actors. Readers may use the phrase "out of character" to mean almost the exact opposite of what it means in the first two senses; rather than inconsistent or inauthentic behavior, it can also describe fully authentic behavior, as when we use it with reference to actors who speak "as themselves," *in propria persona*, rather than as the fictional characters they are portraying. In this sense, being "out of character" actually means the reverse of what it does for an actor; when a character acts "out of character," the role assigned to him/her becomes apparent *as role*. And thus while to describe a character as a "puppet" seems like an insult, this form of authenticity is marked by the puppetness of the character being revealed *as* puppetness.

Critics thus regularly use theatrical metaphors to voice their complaints and critiques of fictions and, in particular, of characterization. For instance, a different review of *The Duke's Children* adopts the language of force and implicitly compares Trollope to a playwright:

The author evidently supposed himself justified in making them [the young ladies] say the things they do say, because it is quite possible they might *think* them. But surely to say what you think is in many cases the most unnatural thing in the world. The words which Mr. Trollope puts into the mouths of his candid young ladies too frequently strike the reader as out of all nature or possibility, as almost monstrous when addressed to the ears which receive them, and as certain to produce an effect upon any mortal hearer the absolute contrary of that aimed at.¹⁴¹

Trollope not only “makes” the ladies say certain things, but he puts words into their mouths, as though he is a playwright, the characters are the actors, and their “unnatural” acts are merely the stage acting.

The idea that the words of a character belong to an author is certainly not unique to this example. Everyone except the most naïve of fiction readers knows that ultimately the words of every character “belong” to the author; but sometimes when authors, particularly realist authors, fail to sufficiently hide or obscure this, a reader may feel as though some sort of fictional contract has been betrayed, and as if the author is trying to trick or manipulate his/her reader into particular beliefs. While the above review does not accuse Trollope of attempting to convince his readers to his own opinions, the following review of an 1875 novel uses the phrase in this way:

The writer's [Mrs. Ross Church (Florence Marryat)] own views are a little mysterious. At times she appears to be skeptical, at others she puts into the mouths of characters expressions which lead us to the conclusion that she has some sort of belief in a ‘bridge of communication that unites sphere to sphere,’ and so on.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ “*The Duke's Children*,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 49, no. 1285 (June 12, 1880): 767-768.

¹⁴² “*Open! Sesame!*” *Athenaeum* 2479 (May 1, 1875): 583.

It's not clear what textual details led this reviewer to the conclusion that the words spoken by characters actually "belonged" to the author, but the idea of the character as a mouthpiece of the author is clear.

In a similar use of the theater metaphor, Victorian critics sometimes speak of characters as being "assigned parts" in a particular text. For instance, a Victorian reviewer might say that Dorothea Brooke is assigned the part of the heroine, Rowena is assigned the role of the leading lady, Uriah Heep has been assigned the part of the villain, and so on. That is, a division is made between the characters in and of themselves and the role they are asked to play in the text; how they are divided must be a matter of some perplexity, of course, since for any given reader they only exist *as* that role, at least until some crux in characterization or plot allows a reader to divide them. A review of Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* uses such terminology:

In the present tale, no less than in the earlier stories, the country-town quality are London gentlefolks transplanted to a small provincial borough; the rural neighbourhood is but a patch of Notting Hill; and *the parts assigned to the leading characters* betray the writer's ignorance of the sharply-marked gradations of rank, the apparently trivial but practically important varieties of sentiment, the conservative jealousies and the unyielding influences that are the characteristics of English country-town life.¹⁴³ [emphasis added]

The implied scenario is that the author assigned certain social roles and ranks to characters who preexisted that assignment—this formulation is of course not literal, but it is nonetheless meaningful.

It is in this way that a character can achieve a sense of partial autonomy from the text and author that created and encompasses it, the sense of partial autonomy that is so central to indignant reading. This partial autonomy helps to explain the ways in which indignant reading is a sign of both success and failure. Victorian critics often praise the "independence" of characters

¹⁴³ "Chronicles of Carlingford. *Miss Marjoribanks*," *Athenaeum* 2019 (July 7, 1866): 12.

from authors as a measure of their vitality and realism. *The Westminster Review*, for instance, praises George Eliot by describing her characters as “creatures so real that they seem existences independent of the author’s.”¹⁴⁴ In contrast, the same article describes more poorly written characters as “rather puppets in the hands of fate, than the actual makers of fate.”¹⁴⁵ Puppets, in this sense, aren’t independent at all. This binary of independence and puppetry, however, is insufficient to describe the experience of reading characters. As a *Macmillan’s* review observed, only truly “realistic” characters can seem “out of character”:

a character which has neither been imagined nor observed, but invented, has features of its own. Its saying and doings seem to have no touch of the inevitable. It might say or do anything, and the reader would experience no surprise; for having no character, properly speaking, it cannot do anything out of character. This kind of puppet is most conspicuously present, as might have been expected, in the works of the sensational novelists, who depend entirely on invention.¹⁴⁶

A puppet cannot act “out of character.” It is only when a character actually has some hold on our imagination that we feel something has been violated by a change or hiccup in characterization. There must then be a third category, between independent existence and puppet, between autonomy and its total absence: a form of independence or autonomy that is only registered through the violation of that independence, through indignation.

The notion of characters as actors playing parts written for them by the author may seem like a return to a theory of authors representing characters rather than creating them, in which authors have the power of revelation and/or evaluation rather than creation. Indeed, comments in which characters are discussed as having been assigned parts can be neutral or harmless – to

¹⁴⁴ “George Eliot as Novelist,” *Westminster Review* 54, no. 1 (July 1878): 119.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁴⁶ “Invention and Imagination,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 56, no. 334 (August 1887): 275-278.

declare that Dorothea Brooke has been assigned the role of the heroine seems like it's merely the casual and neutral observation that the heroine of the novel is the character named Dorothea. Dorothea is not defined by her status as heroine, in most accounts at least. Sometimes, though, the judgment of the role the character has been assigned bears value and weight—and this is where the special authority of the author comes in. Readers can be quite peeved that a particular character is deprived the honor of the role of heroine, for instance, and it may not be entirely out of line to infer that this refusal to give the role of heroine to a character may be a slight upon that character's character (as it were). Actors, generally speaking, are not offended by being asked to play characters who are villains or are morally repugnant or unpleasant—unless, perhaps, they are bad actors who can only play parts very much like their own personalities.

The indignation of readers at authorial characterization seems to suggest that characters are, imaginatively, very bad actors; the ideal fictional text aligns the actors (characters) with their roles as closely as possible, so that separation is minimized. When characters seem to be miscast—not to strain the metaphor—readers may interpret that miscasting as an act of harm, authors forcing their characters to behave and *exist* in ways that insults those characters. Readers are indignant against the author not (or not only) because of the disappointment of poor or inconsistent writing, but because, in their conception, that writing misrepresents the character and constitutes something like a slur. In short, such readers are resisting authorial autonomy/authority over the character initially created by that authority. The character has moved beyond the authority of the writer, though the writer can still harm that character in a way no other person can.

One of the most vehement examples of this form of reader response is Algernon Charles Swinburne's discussion of Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. To be appreciated in its entirety, long

passages from Swinburne's 1877 *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* must be read; I only have room to cite the relevant excerpts. Swinburne, by his own report, loved the first two-thirds of the novel, which made the last third all the more difficult for him. "But who," he asks, "can forget the horror of inward collapse, the sickness of spiritual reaction, the reluctant incredulous rage of disenchantment and disgust, with which he first came upon the thrice unhappy third part?"¹⁴⁷ The crux that so offended Swinburne was one that many critics took issue with, though perhaps not so vehemently as Swinburne: Maggie's brief submission to Stephen Guest's seduction/proposal. Writes Swinburne:

But what shall any one say of the upshot? If we are really to take it on trust, to confront it as a contingent or conceivable possibility, resting our reluctant faith on the authority of so great a female writer, that a woman of Maggie Tulliver's kind can be moved to any sense but that of bitter disgust and sickening disdain by a thing—I will not write, a man—of Stephen Guest's; if we are to accept as truth and fact, however astonishing and revolting, so shameful an avowal, so vile a revelation as this; in that ugly and lamentable case, our only remark, as our only comfort, must be that now at least the last word of realism has surely been spoken, the last abyss of cynicism has surely been sounded and laid bare.¹⁴⁸

Swinburne objects to the idea that Maggie Tulliver is tempted by Stephen Guest. He objects not so much to the external results of this temptation but to the characterization of Maggie as someone who could be and is tempted, that Maggie herself is written as moved. Moreover, it is not Maggie who is to blame—it's George Eliot, the great female writer who has authority here.

Swinburne continues:

The hideous transformation by which Maggie is debased—were it but for an hour—into the willing or yielding companion of Stephen's flight would probably and deservedly have been resented as a brutal and vulgar outrage on the part of a male novelist. But the man never lived, I do believe, who could have done such a thing as this: as the man, I should suppose, does not exist who could make for the first time the acquaintance of Mr.

¹⁴⁷ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Note on Charlotte Brontë* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1877), 29-30.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

Stephen Guest with no incipient sense of a twitching in his fingers and a tingling in his toes at the notion of any contact between Maggie Tulliver and a cur so far beneath the chance of promotion to the notice of his horsewhip, or elevation to the level of his boot. Here then is the patent flaw, here too plainly is the flagrant blemish, which defaces and degrades the very crown and flower of George Eliot's wonderful and most noble work; no rent or splash on the raiment, no speck of scar on the skin of it, but a cancer in the very bosom, a gangrene in the very flesh. It is a radical and mortal plague-spot, corrosive and incurable; in the apt and accurate phrase of Rabelais, 'an enormous solution of continuity.' The book is not the same before it and after. No washing or trimming, no pruning or purging, could eradicate or efface it; it could only be removable by amputation and remediable by cautery.¹⁴⁹

This phrase—"the hideous transformation by which Maggie is debased...into the willing or yielding companion"—is crucial. Maggie is debased but by whom? This passive syntax is odd because what Swinburne is describing transforms the way we normally think of authors, on the one hand, and people, on the other. Maggie is not debased by anything *Stephen* has done, by any outrage to which he has subjected to her, but by Eliot's drawing of her identity. The word "transformation" here indicates that Swinburne believes Eliot has changed in some important way the nature of Maggie's character, of her identity.

Eliot has, in Swinburne's operational language, "debased" Maggie; this language suggests that her characterization can be likened to a sexual violation. It is a violation against *her* but also a general moral problem, related to the morality of realism, showing, apparently, what *is* without regard to what *is right*. But it is also a particularly aesthetic violation of ethics. As Swinburne puts it,

It is even a worse offense against ethics, a more grievous insult to the moral sentiment or sense, because more deliberate and elaborate, than the two actual and unpardonable sins of Shakespeare: the menace of unnatural marriage between Oliver and Celia, and again between Isabella and her 'old fantastical duke of dark corners.' Scandalous and injurious as these vile suggestions are, they are yet but as hasty blots dropped by an impatient hand, as crude excrescences which may be pared and leave no scar, as broken hints of a

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 35-37.

bad dream which the waking memory may be fain and able to forget, to shake off it and be clean again...

Far otherwise it is with the poor noble heroine so strangely disgraced and discrowned of natural honour by the strong and cruel hand which created her; and which could not redeem or raise her again, even by the fittest and noblest of all deaths conceivable, from the mire of ignominy into which it had been pleased to cast her down or bid her slip.¹⁵⁰

The nature which has ended up Maggie's ought not to be Maggie's nature, though Swinburne seems to accept, even as he resents and vituperates, Eliot's authority, the "strong hand that created her." He *does* seem to accept that indeed the change has taken place—it's not that he rejects this turn in the novel altogether and continues to imagine a Maggie who was not transformed into the willing companion of Stephen Guest. Once Maggie has been created this way, there is no redemption, there is no turning back from this characterization, even should Eliot herself wish it and attempt to write it.

Swinburne, it should be noted, was not the only one to object to Maggie's characterization in the latter part of the novel. *The Examiner* glosses this development as such:

[Maggie] abandons a sentiment of love, slow and long in its growth, for a sudden passion of mere lust towards a man who displays only coarse animal love for herself, and this under surrounding circumstances that are designed to aggravate the shame. The author does not seem to perceive how despicable the heroine at last becomes, and how little sympathy is to be won for her tortures and her doubts, for her conflict of duty with passion.¹⁵¹

Lust, the reviewer emphasizes, is the only thing that can "account for Maggie's sudden love of Stephen," and the only solution to the problem is the flood that drowns Maggie and Tom. Meanwhile, *The Westminster Review* responded explicitly to Swinburne, even quoting him in order to argue against him:

¹⁵⁰ Swinburne, 38-39.

¹⁵¹ "The Mill on the Floss," *Examiner* 2733 (June 16, 1860): 372-373.

We have no admiration for Stephen Guest, but to call him “a thing” does not advance our knowledge much; and to suppose that a girl with Maggie Tulliver’s nature could not fall in love with this man, with his handsome face and form, his deep manly voice, and his manly passion, is to make a supposition which is only excusable on the ground of a curious ignorance of the truth of a woman’s nature, and a curious carelessness in the reading of the pages in which Maggie Tulliver stands eloquently confessed.... But to deny the truth of this is to make a foolish assertion which our whole knowledge of life, and a consistent reading of Maggie’s character refute. To have made her walk straight to the goal of duty—to have made her consistently noble throughout—would have been to be dishonest to the whole purpose of the book; would have been a violence to the whole of the early part of the story.¹⁵²

This disagreement points out, of course, is that beyond certain general guidelines, there can be no objective and universal decisions about when characterization becomes character assassination. Note that there are two ideas raised here about what causes readerly pleasure and what represents artistic or aesthetic integrity: truth to “reality,” on the one hand, and truth to morality, on the other. These ideas are usually weapons used variously on either side of characterization debates. Swinburne, after all, suggests that accepting Maggie’s characterization means that realism has outdone itself and become pure cynicism, while *The Westminster Review* suggests that only a “realistic” characterization of Maggie does justice both to the world and to the novel.

The relationship between these two grounds of defense in the *Westminster Review* is significant: to deny Maggie’s characterization is

to make a supposition which is only excusable on the ground of a curious ignorance of the truth of a woman’s nature, *and* a curious carelessness in the reading of the pages... to make a foolish assertion which our whole knowledge of life, *and* a consistent reading of Maggie’s character refute.¹⁵³ [emphasis added]

¹⁵² “George Eliot as Novelist,” *Westminster Review* 54, no. 1 (July 1878): 122-124.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

Note the repeated use of “and”: the reviewer conflates truth to nature with character consistency. Dramatic characterization here entails both external and internal characterization.

The view of fiction in which fictional presentations can both misrepresent as they continue the work of fictional creation is taken to an extreme in reviews that critique novelists for their injustice in their overall system of characterization, in the decision that one character will be villain and one will be hero—in the giving of “too many” faults or vices to a single character. *Fraser’s Magazine* made this objection to George Macdonald’s novel *Sir Gibbie*, accusing Macdonald of “unjust severity to those types of character which he does not love.”¹⁵⁴ So far, this might be in line with the forms of injustice I have already considered; but Macdonald’s severity is not in his plotting of the character (that is, in some plotted punishment like a death), nor in Macdonald’s evaluation of the character, nor in a change in the character’s nature for which Macdonald is responsible. Rather, the injustice is in the very basis of the character as created. Macdonald is unfair to his characters by making them too wicked. As the reviewer of *Fraser’s* puts it, “While [Macdonald] makes his heroes superior to all mankind, he shapes his anti-heroes, the personages who act as foils to their excellence, in the meanest moulds, recognizing, as would appear, no intermediate ground between the magnanimous and the base.”¹⁵⁵

Macdonald chooses as one of his “foils” a farmer’s son, Fergus Duff, who is

invariably contemptible... though he is permitted to develop into a popular preacher.... He is a poor, crawling creature, capable of any pettiness, vulgar to the core, and inhuman in his hopeless meanness as the other is in his virtue... as poor a cur as ever was invested with human shape.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ “Recent Novels,” *Fraser’s Magazine* 598 (October 1879): 550-551.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 551.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Macdonald *makes* his characters be a certain way; if this way is excessively awful, his characterization can be accused of injustice. Part of what is involved here is a general aesthetic standard of moral realism—since nobody is all good or all bad, it may be problematic to read works in which some of the character are all good and others all bad. Such a work fails morally, aesthetically, and realistically.

This reviewer thinks Macdonald's "bad" characters go beyond ordinary badness:

The personages with whom he surrounds and contrasts his blameless heroes are not even of ordinary mould, and mingled good and evil, but miserable natures not worth the moral powder and shot which these impersonations of virtue lavish upon them in the book before us.¹⁵⁷

The moral battle being played out is unfair—the sides are too unequal. So unequal, indeed, that the reviewer rebelliously identifies with Fergus, or almost does; he is driven to a defense of this apparently miserable, worthless character.

We are almost driven to take the part of Fergus Duff, so pitilessly is he belaboured by the too excellent Donal, with a consciousness of superior virtue, which is the last thing we can tolerate in a hero. The wicked person is not left a leg, nay not even a toe, to stand upon. He is helplessly beaten in logic, in morals, on every ground upon which a man may make a stand, and there is a mixture of scorn in the arguments of the conqueror which is, of all things in the world, the least becoming sentiment which could be entertained by personages so exalter.¹⁵⁸

There is a confusion of sides here; on the one hand, the reviewer may be saying that he's taking the part of Fergus against Donal, the hero of the novel, who is pitiless toward him in his superiority. But as suggested above, he blames the author for how he has shaped them both, so perhaps he means that he takes the part of Fergus against MacDonald.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 551.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

The mystery of this injustice is as such: if Fergus Duff is indeed a poor, crawling creature—and there is no evidence to suggest that he isn't—then presumably there is no reason to consider a description or transcription of these qualities an injustice. A character is *created as* utterly worthless and loathsome, and despite (or perhaps because of) there being no grounds on which to have any kind of warm feeling for this character, warm feelings result. This characterization is considered “unjust severity,” despite there being no textual way to consider it unjust. How does characterization become an injustice? There must be an implicit assumption that the “actual” character behind/preexisting/referred to by the text is actually a more moderate character. But again, at the same time, the author’s ability to characterize the character has more weight than anyone else. The character exists in some liminal space, and the ideal situation is for the shadowy character imagined by the reader to line up with the character drawn by the author.

This is a perplexing oddity of the readers’ experience of fictional characters, but one that is not exceptional or unique to this review. The *Athenaeum*, for instance, objects on the grounds of poetical justice to Alfred Elwes’ *Frank and Andrea; or, Forest Life in the Island of Sardinia*:

all the sense, courage, discretion, indeed *all* the virtues that are called for in the course of the narrative, [are] given to the English Frank, whilst Andrea, the Italian boy, though endowed with many holiday good qualities, comes out very poorly, not to say pitifully, in the heroic line.¹⁵⁹

This takes character injustice to its extreme – the very basic essentials of characterization are being objected to, the decisions about, essentially, the moral universe of the fiction and how that impacts the individual characters.

Conclusion

¹⁵⁹ “*Frank and Andrea; or, Forest Life in the Island of Sardinia*,” *Athenaeum* 1675 (December 3, 1859): 639.

Let us return, once more, to *Diana of the Crossways*:

Perhaps it is somewhat out of character, but, under severe pecuniary pressure, the haughty beauty, though in a moment of aberration, has sold a State secret to an enterprising journalist. It is surprising that Mr. Meredith should have made this high-souled heroine succumb to such paltry temptations as debt and the fear of restraint.... But the fact is that in the novel of 'Diana,' and notably in the discreditable and inconsistent episode of selling the secret confided to her by trusting friendship, Mr. Meredith drew upon his fancy, but not in the way we should assume. It was tolerably notorious that the prototype of the fascinating beauty of the novel was a lady who sparkled in London society, and that the admirer she betrayed was a well-known minister who held office in the Cabinet. The scene was suggested, not by facts, but by calumnies which were exposed and refuted, though for a time they obtained circulation and a certain credence.¹⁶⁰

It should be clear by now that this reviewer's indignation can be understood as arising from fictional inconsistencies, and his objections would probably not have been fully resolved with the addition of a disclaimer that the novel was based in fiction, not reality. The critic's use of the language of force is now fully legible: "It is surprising that Mr. Meredith should have *made* this high-souled heroine succumb to such paltry temptations as debt and the fear of restraint" (emphasis added). The conception of this episode is subtle; Meredith is not making his heroine sell the secret, but making her succumb to particular temptations, temptations that are themselves unworthy of Diana. He is making her behave out of character: externally, with respect to her "prototype," Caroline Norton; internally, with respect to her own "haughtiness" and "high soul"; and dramatically, insofar as this mischaracterization "discredits" Diana's actual character.

The language and grammar of this review exhibits crucial ambiguity: "But the fact is that in the novel of 'Diana,' and notably in the discreditable and inconsistent episode of selling the secret confided to her by trusting friendship, Mr. Meredith drew upon his fancy...." Is the episode discreditable to Meredith or to Diana herself? Since he is the primary subject of the

¹⁶⁰ "The Shaving of Shagpat," 47-48.

sentence, we might expect that *he* is the discredited and inconsistent one. But he is *not* the subject of the verb “selling,” and the “her” that follows “selling” can only refer to Diana; that it is an inexplicit pronoun lends further credence to the idea that Diana as subject has been implicit. The fact is that both are being inconsistent—Meredith in his writing of Diana and Diana in selling the secret—and Meredith discredits Diana, as Diana discredits herself, *and* as Meredith discredits himself as an artist.

The act of character assassination, then, is also an act of authorial self-harm; in harming their characters through misrepresentation and mischaracterization, authors hurt their own reputations as fair creators, who are supposed to hold the scales of justice evenly, and as artists, who are supposed to achieve aesthetic unity and consistency. But as in the previous chapter, this is an aesthetic failing that ultimately leads to a different form of success, leading readers to align themselves more closely with wronged characters—even at the expense of the author’s own reputation.

Chapter Three:

Fictionality in the Nineteenth Century

Indignant reading emerged as a central critical practice in the nineteenth century in part because of the structures of the literary institutions, including the dominant form of the Victorian novel and the conventions of novel reviewing. Critics and readers tended to assume that the novel ought to seem like reality (a point to which I return below), that the doings of the imaginary persons were the most important features of the novels, and that the (third-person) narrator represented the voice of the author and creator of the novel. These features led critics to emphasize how authors treated characters, to consider the world of the novel as an extension of the real world, and to hold the author responsible for the creation, representation, and judgment of characters. To be sure, not all novels had these features, and not all critics understood novels in this light, but these were often the basic assumed features.

Indignant reading is also made possible by a set of underlying assumptions about the nature of fictional literature. For much of England's eighteenth century, the central question about fiction was whether it was distinct from lying; as the form of the novel became established, so too did the idea of fiction as a practice distinct from deception. While many prominent scholars have explored the idea of fictionality in the eighteenth century, few have attended to the role of fictionality as such in the nineteenth century. Scholars may be following the cues of Victorian critics, who rarely addressed the topic explicitly. In contrast, eighteenth-century commenters were determined to distinguish between fiction and lying, and in the post-Victorian era, twentieth-century philosophers were determined to distinguish the nature of fictional speech and fictional beings. Sandwiched between these two different approaches, Victorian thinkers and critics seem to have been surprisingly unconcerned with the distinction between fiction and non-

fiction. This indifference, however, is a symptom of a Victorian theory of fictionality, rather than a sign of its absence.

In this chapter, I first examine the debates around fictionality prior to the nineteenth century. I then argue that Victorian critics divided the field of letters along generic lines that did not fully correspond to the fiction/nonfiction binary. While such a binary might categorize poetry and novels together, the Victorian conceptual scheme contrasted them while grouping novels and history together, genres with differing fictional statuses but united by a commitment to the probable, as opposed to the romantic or fantastic. Indeed, the novel, the exemplary fictional text, was understood on the model of the historical text, with the novelist an analogue to the historian. This parallel produced an interpretive protocol that encouraged indignant reading. Toward the end of the chapter, I turn to modern, twentieth-century theories of fictionality, which, taking as their foundation that fiction is not true, theorize fiction as paradoxical, based in various degrees of illusion. This conceptual landscape makes indignant reading unthinkable.

Fiction and Lies Before the Nineteenth Century

Critics, readers, and audiences in the twenty-first century rarely, if ever, wonder whether fiction constitutes a lie. Lying matters only if one is making a truth claim, as controversies over fabricated “memoirs” would suggest. Such controversies confirm that while lying is as terrible as it ever was, *fiction* is neither lying nor telling truth—it is something different altogether. This distinction is made possible by a theory, whether implicit or explicitly formulated, of fictionality.

For a long time, the question of lying was central to literature’s existence. If fiction was lying, according to most accounts, then perhaps it ought not to be propagated, because a lie offers nothing of value, or because lying was inherently sinful. Famously, Plato, in *The Republic*,

banished Homer and Hesiod for imitating appearances rather than reality. Poetry, he suggested, is a species of lying, and poets mislead people as to the nature of gods.¹⁶¹ Since then, the relationship between fiction and lying has energized cultural critics and been a major crux in discussions of the morality of fiction. The idea that fiction is merely lying reached prominence in the early modern period and began to subside in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, as the form of the novel gained acceptance.

Of course, fiction and poetry have often had their defenders, those who suggested that fiction was distinct from lying and those who suggested that it was a beneficial, or at least harmless, species of lie. Cicero, Quintilian, and Plutarch all defended poets: though not concerned with truth, their invented facts did not actually mislead anyone.¹⁶² Similarly, St. Augustine suggested that if a story was *openly* false, it could not actually deceive anyone. In the beginning of the eighteenth century, a number of readers cautioned others of the dangers of fiction. The abbé de Bellegarde, for instance, warned readers of the dangers of loving “the false,” which is to say, reading novels.¹⁶³ But by the time Henry Fielding wrote *Tom Jones*, it had apparently become acceptable to admit that a work was indeed fictional—neither true nor a lie. As Catherine Gallagher argues in her essay, “The Rise of Fictionality,” “although consistently contrasted with the veridical, fictional narration ceased to be a subcategory of dissimulation as it became a literary phenomenon.”¹⁶⁴ What changed between the discussions about whether

¹⁶¹ Plato, *The Republic*, book II, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 49-56.

¹⁶² Percy G. Adams, *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983), 83.

¹⁶³ Adams, 84-85.

¹⁶⁴ Catherine Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1:338.

imaginative literature constitutes a species of lying and a text like *Tom Jones*, which confidently asserts its own fictionality?

According to Gallagher, the category of fiction had to be invented. As long as fictions needed to be blatantly untrue in order to preserve themselves against accusations of deception, as in St. Augustine's defense, there was no real theory of fiction. This account explains the prevalence of the "manifestly improbable" in very early fictions: they could not be accused of deceiving their readers into believing that they were real.¹⁶⁵ Narratives that "seemed referential" were often accused of fraud: "Fictionality only became visible when it became credible, because it only needed conceptualizing as the difference between fiction and lies became less obvious."¹⁶⁶ Indeed, while a number of narratives prior to the mid-century novel met the requirements for what we would now call fictions, Gallagher observes that "they were not so described at the time or grouped together under any single category."¹⁶⁷

In the early eighteenth century, imaginative literature propagated in the context of the largely unshakeable idea that there was something suspect or deceptive in fiction. While some tales were so flagrantly untrue—fantastic or magical—that they garnered little anxiety, for the most part, it was the job of proponents of fiction, or other imaginative tales, to defend it against such charges. Indeed, Gallagher suggests that the "test" for a theory of fictionality is how a culture deals with plausible stories.¹⁶⁸ The defensive strategies used in the eighteenth century seem to reveal a culture in search of a fictionality. The cruxes that emerge, including a

¹⁶⁵ Gallagher, 338.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 339- 340.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 338.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 339.

distinction between allegorical truth and probable truth and the proliferation of genre distinctions beyond a fiction/non-fiction binary, shape the Victorian approach to the issue.

Lennard Davis, in his influential work, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*, argues that a central component of reading in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was uncertainty about whether any given work was fact or fiction, in part because it was convention to claim that a story was true.¹⁶⁹ Aphra Behn, for instance, claimed that her 1688 *Ooronoko* was true:

I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this royal slave, to entertain my reader with adventures of a feigned hero, whose life and fortunes Fancy may manage at the poet's pleasure; nor in relating the truth, design to adorn it with any accidents, but such as arrived in earnest to him: And it shall come simply into the world, recommended by its own proper merits, and natural intrigues; there being enough of reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of invention.¹⁷⁰

The supposed truth of Behn's account is offered with moral and artistic superiority—*others* may adorn or even invent (“feign”) their tales, but not Behn—though, to be fair, scholars are undecided as to the extent to which *Oroonoko* is indeed based in truth.¹⁷¹ Similarly, Defoe often insisted that his works were based in fact—were history rather than story. “By claiming that his work is founded on truth,” argues Davis, “Defoe, the journalist par excellence of the early eighteenth century, was treating his novel as if it were virtually indistinguishable in genre from his news writings.”¹⁷² The consistency of such truth claims in this period suggests that it was

¹⁶⁹ Lennard Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 23-24.

¹⁷⁰ Aphra Behn, *Ooronoko; or, The Royal Slave*, in *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Montague Summers (London: William Heinemann, 1915), 5:129 .

¹⁷¹ According to Davis, Ernest Bermbaum's 1913 article, “Mrs. Behn's Biography a Fiction” (*PMLA* 28:432-453) definitely demonstrates that Behn is lying (106n).

¹⁷² Davis, 15.

important for eighteenth-century readers to think that a text was at least potentially true, even if they were uncertain as to the extent. Whether authors feared that readers would not engage with works they did not believe to be true or they wished to allay the public's anxiety about lying, truth claims were at any rate regularly suspected, and fictions pretending to be true were often attacked as deceitful. It seems reasonable to make the minimal assertion that the literate public had at best an uncertain concept of fictionality, and that the status of any truth claim—both the truth of that truth claim and the importance of that truth claim—was questionable.

Indeed, Defoe's truth claims were often suspected. In the preface to *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe asserts that his work is true, calling himself its editor: he "believes the thing to be a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it..."¹⁷³ As Davis points out, Defoe was seriously challenged on this assertion by, among others, Charles Gildon in *An Epistle to Daniel Defoe*. Gildon claimed that *Crusoe* is merely a "fable" and attempted to prove that the work was inconsistent and therefore fictional.¹⁷⁴ As a result, Defoe had Robinson Crusoe himself deny the charges in a preface; when this fascinating attempt failed to convince, Defoe resorted to claiming that *Crusoe* was merely allegorically true.¹⁷⁵

Legal and financial factors led authors like Defoe to abandon the truth defense, though authors did continue to use it with varying degrees of sincerity. As Davis points out, the 1724 revision of the 1712 Stamp Act was the first law governing print that defined distinctions between printed matter on the basis of content, rather than format.¹⁷⁶ No matter how it was

¹⁷³ Daniel Defoe, preface to *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 3.

¹⁷⁴ Charles Gildon, *An Epistle to Daniel Defoe* (London, 1719), cited in Davis, 156-157.

¹⁷⁵ Davis, 158.

¹⁷⁶ Davis, 92.

printed, if the content of a text was “news,” it was therefore taxable, thus providing financial incentive for a work *not* to be mistaken for factual discourse.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, works that claimed to be true, under the pretense of being “found” documents, were sometimes continued by different authors, to the financial disadvantage of the original authors. Richardson’s claim that *Pamela* was based on real records meant that any other author might very well claim to have found those records, or even new ones, and publish them—as they did.¹⁷⁸ As Davis puts it, “authorial disavowal became distinctly unsuited for maintaining fictional control over one’s writing.”¹⁷⁹ If truth and deceit in fiction had previously been a moral question, in which it was in one’s best interest to claim a text as true, it was now becoming a legal and generic question in which “truth” had at least some disadvantages. A category that escaped the truth/lies binary, that was neither true nor false, would thus have significant value.

Davis argues that these changes crucially distinguished news and novels, fact and fiction: “novels seem to have been assigned the responsibility for carrying fictional discourse, and news had the responsibility for carrying factual discourse.”¹⁸⁰ Significantly, however, the division motivated by these laws did not strictly fall along the lines of fiction/nonfiction. It merely distinguished *one form* of nonfiction from fiction. News, of course, constitutes non-fiction, but the category of non-news includes a number of genres, fictional and non-fictional alike,

¹⁷⁷ Davis, 97.

¹⁷⁸ In 1741, *Memoir of the Life of Lady H., The Celebrated Pamela* claimed to be the memoir of the real Pamela; *Pamela’s Conduct in High Life* was published, without Richardson’s knowledge, as the sequel to Richardson’s first two volumes. The booksellers, Chandler and Kelly, claimed that their book, not Richardson’s, was published directly from the real Pamela’s own papers, found among Mrs. Jervis’s possessions. See Davis, 180-181.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 181.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 100.

including imaginative literature and history, for example. The category of fictionality thus develops in a context in which it is opposed one form of non-fiction—news—but not all.

In this context, defending the novel as a form of allegorical truth—in which it invents particulars but remains truthful because those particulars refer to real people/places or abstract truths—became increasingly appropriate. Allegory was understood as both true and false without raising serious alarms for those otherwise skeptical about imaginative literature.¹⁸¹ Indeed, the allegorical defense of fiction has a long history. It may be how what some consider the first English novel was born: John Bunyan, according to Davis, avoided the problems and pitfalls of fictionality in *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) by resorting to the tradition that poetical truths might be “truer” than real ones.¹⁸² In other words, it may be that fiction evolved out of allegory, and it may be allegory that allowed fiction to become a distinct category or genre.

Davis contends that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors were in search of a category to define the nature of their work. The question was “whether it was possible to write fictions at all without maintaining that they were factual,”¹⁸³ and allegory may have offered one answer to this question. Gallagher, however, distinguishes both the truth defense and the allegory defense from the category and concept of fictionality proper because they both maintain the “referential imperative,”¹⁸⁴ and the hallmark of fictionality is the lack of reference. Defoe, for instance, “clung to a particularity of reference, even as he shifted the grounds of his claim from literal truth to allegorical allusion.”¹⁸⁵ That is, Defoe first asserted the existence of a person

¹⁸¹ Davis, 161.

¹⁸² Ibid., 104.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 178.

¹⁸⁴ Gallagher, 339.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

named Robinson Crusoe, then asserted that “Robinson Crusoe” referred to some other person; ultimately, according to Gallagher, the proper name in a novel would refer to “nobody in particular.”¹⁸⁶ Gallagher’s argument is that novels, in inventing (or discovering) fiction, abandoned strict referentiality in favor of non-referentiality.

Non-referentiality, however, even in Gallagher’s account, can be seen as a greater referentiality, as in reference to abstraction, generalization or type.¹⁸⁷ I would suggest, therefore, that allegory is a crucial step, one that should not be entirely discounted as merely proto-fictionality. An allegorized figure can refer equally to the particular and the abstract—and “nobody in particular” may very well be “mankind.” The capaciousness and variability of the possible referents of allegory also accords with Michael McKeon’s discussion of the rise of the novel. McKeon argues that the development of the novel out of the romance is part of a shift in the definition of truth, from historical accuracy (under which definition fiction would be “false”) to a wider understanding that includes truth as the probable, which, as Gallagher argues, replaced personal reference in the mid-eighteenth-century novel.¹⁸⁸ Verisimilitude, rather than a sign of lying, became a sign of truth.¹⁸⁹ Certain forms of allegory may very well be identical with fiction, and it seems at least plausible that justifying fictions as allegory led to the stabilization of the category of fiction as a form distinct both from non-fiction and from deception, escaping, or at least evading, the binary of truth and lies.

¹⁸⁶ Gallagher, 341.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 342.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 343.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 341. See also Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

Truth and Reality: Victorian Fictionality

Accounts of the rise of fictionality, like accounts of the rise of the novel, often end where the above section ends, with an established novel and apparently established concept of fictionality. There are few historical accounts of fictionality in the nineteenth century; instead, we have chronicles of the development of fictionality and the novel in the eighteenth century, and ahistorical theories and philosophies of fictionality offered by twentieth-century theorists, frequently using the nineteenth-century realist novel as an exemplary case. We thus might be tempted to conclude that the nineteenth century is a period of stability when it comes to the fictional—after all, if, as McKeon seems to suggest, the verisimilar, or the probable, becomes the marker of fictional truth, then the period that gave us the realist novel should have a consistent conception of fictionality behind it. I would like to suggest, however, that the conception of the fictional in the nineteenth century was still very much in flux. Critics and commenters continued to grapple with what the fictional should and did look like, and a number of the decisive features of Victorian fictionality arose out of the particularities of the eighteenth-century stabilization of fictionality: a tendency toward an allegorical (broadly defined) interpretation of fiction; an emphasis on probability as the distinctive feature of fictionality; and a literary field divided by genre, not by the binary of fiction and non-fiction.

Aesthetics and the Fictional

The theory of the fictional as the non-referential as a defense against accusations of falsehood, which Gallagher suggests was enacted in the publication of *Tom Jones*, is adapted by nineteenth-century critics primarily for poetry, rather than the novel. Victorian poetic theory

takes allegorical truth and Gallagher's non-referentiality to a new end; poetry is "truth" because it refers not to the real world, but to the abstract and ideal, to "what should or should not be." This "aesthetic truth," as it was sometimes called, was based on a model of music as the exemplary aesthetic form: non-narrative, non-imitative, and non-referential. "Poetry" was theorized, and its value justified, on this basis. The novel was excluded since it was usually understood as imitative and referential; and therefore the idea of fictionality, which had long been associated with the novel, was also excluded. The idea of the non-referential is often used, then, not to define fictionality but to exclude it.

John Stuart Mill's 1833 essay, "Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties" exemplifies the concept of aesthetic truth. Mill participates in what became a common use of "truth" as transcending the binary of truth and lies to stand for an emotional and moral truth: "Poetry, when it is really such, is truth."¹⁹⁰ The poetic is by its very nature truth. Mill's formulation echoes Sir Philip Sidney's declaration—perhaps the first "allegory" defense—that "of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar, and, though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar."¹⁹¹ Aesthetic truth is an updating of allegorical truth. Thirty-three years after Mill, E. S. Dallas' *The Gay Science* also theorizes art through a conception of "truth" that tends to baffle any attempt to extract a theory of the fictional. Dallas believes that art cannot be false;¹⁹² rather, he agrees with Samuel Johnson's idea, as put forth in the *Lives of the Poets*, that "'poets profess fiction; but the legitimate end of fiction is the conveyance of truth.'"¹⁹³ The echoes of Sidney are here, too. "Art

¹⁹⁰ J. S. Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger, vol. 1 of *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 346.

¹⁹¹ Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," in *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 348.

¹⁹² E. S. Dallas, *The Gay Science* (New York: Garland, 1986), 109.

¹⁹³ Dallas, 214.

is nothing if not true,” Dallas argues. “It cannot be false without injury to itself; and to speak of fiction as a system of falsehood, is but to misunderstand the language of art, and to grow bewildered over the varieties of truth.”¹⁹⁴ Truth and falsehood have taken on a moral quality that is essentially independent from truth or falsehood in a literal or referential sense, or in the sense implied by philosophical logic or the philosophy of language.

Although allegorical truth helped to defend the concept of fictionality in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth-century idea of aesthetic truth does *not* lead us to a theory of fictionality. In fact, it tended to help critics avoid identifying the nature of the fictional, although it did allow critics to defend *art* (and novels or poetry as art) from zealots insisting on the immorality of fictions. If *some* fictional texts were immoral, it was because they did not reach the level of aesthetic truth, or true artistry, fiction as a general category could be considered moral. While both Mill and Dallas mention fiction, it is consistently an afterthought to an aesthetic modeled not on the referential or imitative but on the expressive. Mill considers prose fiction only in its somewhat diluted poetic sense; the novel, which he calls simply “fiction,” is an essentially imitative form with *some* expressive aspects. “Poetry,” he writes, “when it is really such, is truth; and fiction also, if it is good for anything is truth: but they are different truths.” If poetry is true, then good fiction, insofar as it is like poetry, must also be true, if it is really art. Mill notes that both imitative art and expressive art “testify in similar ways to a community of shared perception and feeling existing in both author and audience;”¹⁹⁵ this is the model of expressive art, expanded to include imitative art. It is equally the province of the poet and the novelist, Mill

¹⁹⁴ Dallas, 215-217.

¹⁹⁵ Ian Small, *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 12.

argues, “to bring thoughts or images before the mind for the purpose of acting upon the emotions,”¹⁹⁶ which, again, is the function of expressive art, expanded to include the imitative.

The literary-theoretical treatises of Victorians tended to disregard fictional narrative for two main reasons. As we have seen, they emphasized expressive rather than mimetic art, often taking music as the paradigmatic art form. Additionally and relatedly, critics and theorists, Dallas in particular, were interested in physiological and psychological explanations of art, which tended to de-emphasize the content of the artwork. This concept of the aesthetic thus encouraged a division between the theoretical criticism of art (often produced in monographs) and the practical criticism in periodicals meant to guide the choices of readers and authors, through an emphasis on character and plot and with the assumption that the novel should speak to contemporary moral life. As a result, critics *discussing* the novel often had little space to *theorize* the novel or fiction in general, and in many cases such theorizing eventually had to be turned to practical ends, such as advice on what to read and how to write. Nonetheless, it was in these reviews that the boundaries of and assumptions about fictionality were produced and expressed.

Genre, Realism, and Probability

For the most part, Victorian critical discourse did not use the category of “the fictional,” in opposition to the non-fictional, as a defined, unique form or concept. Instead, fictional prose (the novel) was usually considered continuous with (but not identical to) other fictional and nonfictional discourses: poetry, philosophy, mythology, and above all history. Hence the importance of the Stamp Act in the eighteenth century, which distinguished one form of nonfiction (news) from others but not between fiction and nonfiction in and of themselves.

¹⁹⁶ Mill, 344.

“Fiction” and “nonfiction” were not the primary categories into which the nineteenth-century literary field was practically or conceptually divided.

This is not to suggest that critics were unable or unwilling to recognize the differences between, say, a novel, a biography, a poem, or any other text—they certainly could and did distinguish between them, and each had their own generic protocols. Nor am I suggesting that these different genres were interchangeable; rather, they should be understood as adjacent, or continuous. In particular, history and the novel were often understood to be linked to one another, and it is this relationship that I examine in depth, in part because it indicates the closeness of fiction and nonfiction, and in part because this relationship is central to the formation of the realist novel. Rather than history and novels offering distinct and incommensurable views of the world, or a particular part it, novels could go places where history could not, and vice versa. They were understood to be complementary: *together*, a more complete view of the world was possible.

This perspective on fiction makes indignant reading not only possible but non-contradictory. If fiction is understood as one kind of narrative among other non-fictional narratives, if it is not accorded a special, unique, or parasitical status, then it makes perfect sense to hold the author responsible for his/her portrayal of a character. When we read history, we do not pretend that the author of the history text does not exist—it is not necessary to do so to believe that what is portrayed is based in reality. It is reasonable to become angry with the author of a history if we believe he has portrayed a person inaccurately or even unfairly. Analogously, readers and critics might similarly consider the justice and accuracy of an author’s portrayal of a fictional character, as I describe in the previous chapter.

The classical precedent for this way of thinking about narratives makes clear that “truthfulness” is only one among many other coherent systems of classification and categorization of narrative. As William Nelson notes, though classical thinkers differed in their emphasis on veracity, fiction was assimilated into the general category of story. For Cicero, *fabula* (that which was neither true nor verisimilar), *historia* (the account of events of the past), and *argumentum* (fictional but possible action) all belonged to the overarching category of narration.¹⁹⁷ Such analyses, writes Nelson, “rendered the differences in verity among the kinds of story of little importance in comparison to their similarity in rhetorical function.”¹⁹⁸ The difference between *fabula* and *argumentum*—a difference like that between romance and the realist novel, a difference *between* two kinds of fiction—is equally important as the difference between narrative based in reality and invented narrative.

However, it does not seem to be the case that nineteenth-century critics adopted this perspective from Cicero. That there is as great a distance between *fabula* and *argumentum* as there is between history and the novel is partially an inheritance from the eighteenth century and partially a consequence of conflicting and intersecting approaches to fiction and to literature in general. As I have suggested, Victorian critics, following a tradition inherited from Sir Philip Sidney, Samuel Johnson, and others, defined poetry *as* truth—if it is not (aesthetically) true, then it is not poetry. In contrast, prose fiction, primarily the novel as well as the short story, was defined and described on spectra of probability and idealism. In other words, prose fiction was categorized not with respect to truth but with respect to reality, in two distinct and significant ways.

¹⁹⁷ William Nelson, *Fact or Fiction: The Dilemma of the Renaissance Storyteller* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 5.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

First, as is well known, prose fiction was evaluated and described on a scale of cynicism to idealism; the “real” is usually located somewhere near the cynicism side, but the novel in general, depending on one’s perspective, might belong closer to idealism. That is, under question is the *morality* of the relationship between prose fiction and reality, and crucially, there were two competing moral imperatives: to truthfully reflect reality, and to represent the ideal. Secondly, prose fiction was evaluated in terms of probability. The success of the “truth” imperative was marked by the probability of the events depicted. The improbable was the territory of romance, not the novel. Note the contrast here with the earlier use of improbability, in which it constituted a truthful announcement that one was writing fiction. For the Victorians, improbability was still a potential genre marker, but instead of distinguishing fiction from non-fiction, it distinguished between two kinds of fiction: realist novels and romances.

The axes of probable-improbable and idealist-cynical both attempt to align the fictional to reality, in distinct ways, and it was an ongoing concern to nineteenth-century readers, critics, and authors where on these axes a fictional representation (in the sense of prose fiction) should and did fall. Significantly, neither of these metrics belongs solely to the fictional, nor do they distinguish (in and of themselves) fiction from non-fiction. Moreover, they may help to explain the importance to Victorians of the distinction between novels and romances, a distinction that has been largely irrelevant to modern fictional theorists and philosophers—“romance” may figure, depending on context, the improbable and/or the ideal, two extremes of the fictional axes.

The conversations about these axes differed. With respect to the cynicism-idealism axis, there was, of course, a generally “realist” imperative. Up for discussion, though, was whether any given text or author’s conception of the “real” was actually too cynical or too idealist. Critics of *Vanity Fair*, for instance, might accuse Thackeray’s conception of reality of being too cynical,

and in turn, Thackeray himself might accuse another novel's image of reality of being too idealist. Either extreme might be aesthetically and/or morally improper, but there was little consensus as to the right balance, or where "realism" might fall on the spectrum.

Discussions about fiction and probability went in a different direction. Critics, readers, and authors seem to have been in general agreement that a novel should be probable, in some sense of the word; we might even conclude that the realist imperative determining discussions of the idealist-cynical spectrum is in fact a probability imperative. And indeed, both Catherine Gallagher and Michael McKeon suggest that a crucial component in the development of fictionality and the novel was the establishment of probability as a form of "truthfulness." But matters become more complicated. Nineteenth-century critics routinely find themselves running up against what seems to be a contradiction of probability as a defining feature of fiction: truth is often stranger than fiction. Not all events that occur in reality seemed, either beforehand or even afterwards, like they were "probable." And events in texts that seem improbable may very well have occurred in reality. An obvious point, yes, but one that Victorian critics discussing the probability or improbability of a given text constantly find themselves making. As one critic put it in 1859:

Truth, it has been said, is strange, stranger far than fiction, but it is equally correct to say that fiction is often truer than reality, and that the world of fact, as it seems to us, is not only less beautiful, but less true than the world created in novels, or in poems by genius.¹⁹⁹

For this critic, the weakness of the distinction between the world of fact and the world of fiction arises from the meeting of the two axes of fiction, probability and idealism. Fiction may not only be more probable than reality, but also more "beautiful," which I take to mean more ideal,

¹⁹⁹ "Novels, Novel Readers, and Novel Writers," *The Scottish Review* (July 1859): 243.

perhaps “aesthetically true”—and thus the characteristics that distinguish fiction and reality switch places and become confused.

This problem of probability as a metric of realism leads to—or perhaps is the sign of—a porous and flexible relationship between fictions and non-fictional texts. For instance, in an 1867 essay in *All the Year Round*, entitled “The Spirit of Fiction,” one critic takes as his subject the familiar idea that writing and reading fiction (meaning prose fiction) are sinful because fiction is not truthful, a position he disagrees with.²⁰⁰ The critic suggests that those who object to falsehood, exaggeration, or “willful invention” in fictions fail to fully understand the nature of the fictional and of artistic production.

Great difficulties still exist between the common observer and the writer of genius. The former accuses the latter of intentional exaggeration, substitution, addition, and has never been able in society to see the startling phenomena which he condemns in the romance as melodramatic and unnatural.... Yet every now and then, even the common-place mind is thrown off its balance by some patent revelation which none can ignore, and then is compelled to acknowledge in a phrase which has itself become common-place, that ‘Fact is stranger than fiction.’ Who thought, until yesterday, that we were living in a state of things such as the inquiries into Sheffield trades’ unions have brought to light? Had any novelist alluded to the system, or portrayed any of the assassins who took office under it, he certainly would have been accused of willful untruthfulness. Falsehood and malice would have been charged upon him, and he would have reaped nothing but obloquy for his uncorroborated disclosures.²⁰¹

As Gallagher’s and McKeon’s theories suggest, the question of truth, falsehood, and deception has been transformed into a question of probability and improbability. But this critic identifies the problem that almost inevitably arises when fictionality is considered in terms of realism as a function of probability. The realistic and the probable are not identical—“fact is stranger than fiction.” Improbable, romantic things can and do occur in real life.

²⁰⁰ “The Spirit of Fiction” *All the Year Round* 18, no. 431 (July 27, 1867): 118.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

The critic therefore insists on a more flexible distinction between fiction and fact than those charging fiction with falsehood and sin would allow; he suggests that all myth and history has much of the fictional mixed in with it, a seemingly prescient idea: “In the course of about thirty years most things become mythical; fancies and feelings mingle in the records, and ideas are gradually substituted for facts.”²⁰² Any form of representation can be understood to have something of the fictional in it, as a result of the nature of perception and representation:

To different authors, according to their capacities and dispositions, the facts present a different appearance and receive a different interpretation. When transplanted to the story-book they are seen through an artificial medium, and are exaggerated or diminished according to the purpose intended and the form adopted.²⁰³

Moreover, the critic argues that the transmutations that a tale is likely to undergo, especially over many years, will inevitably increase the amount of “fiction” in the production.²⁰⁴ Ultimately, this essay articulates two ideas central to the Victorian discourse of fictionality. First, the critic suggests that probability is both crucial and inadequate as a defining feature or metric of fictionality. Second, he suggests that while fiction is not identical to myth or historical writing, it is also not incommensurate with them—the difference between them is not a definitive one.

History and Fiction: Scott, Carlyle, and Macaulay

“Truth is stranger than fiction,” then, is in many ways the key to the basis of the Victorian conception of fictionality, and the genre that encodes this problematic cliché—the historical romance—is central to Victorian fictionality. As romances, such texts are improbable

²⁰² Ibid., 119.

²⁰³ Ibid., 119.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 120.

and often fanciful; as histories, they are based in reality and thus by definition realistic. The historical romance, as well as the historical novel (and critics often did not distinguish between the two), is created through the joining of history and fiction (the novel). The historical novel, of course, changed over the course of the nineteenth century, as did critical demands on its aesthetic shape and scholarly accuracy. But with Scott's invention of the historical novel, history and the novel were often seen by critics, readers, and authors as complementary, filling in the aesthetic and epistemological gaps of one other.

Victorian reviewers and critics often pointed out the continuity between novels and history, as well as other fictional and non-fictional genres. They consistently suggested that readers would put down novels to pick up history and vice versa, seeing the two kinds of texts as harmonious in the textual ecosystem of the period, though history was understood to be less morally ambiguous. *The Scottish Review*, for instance, pointed out in 1859 that young people, after reading fiction, "take to history or poetry, or some other species of study."²⁰⁵ Good fiction leads the mind "away into tracts of thought, and start[s] subjects of inquiry, for which other books will become necessary,"²⁰⁶ and a good historical novel excites "a desire for reading history."²⁰⁷ Ultimately, the critic observes, "the best histories are nothing else than historical fictions."²⁰⁸ Similarly, Julia Wedgwood writes of *War and Peace*: "But if the reader of fiction lay down the book with a certain dissatisfaction, the student of history and the friend of peace will linger over it with gratitude."²⁰⁹ In the same essay, she notes that some of the novels she

²⁰⁵ "Novels, Novel Readers, and Novel Writers," 241.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 241-242.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 243-444.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 244.

²⁰⁹ Julia Wedgwood, "Fiction," *Contemporary Review* 50 (December 1886): 902.

discusses confuse the novel with the essay and “blur the lines which divide fiction from biography.”²¹⁰

A number of factors contribute to this tendency to connect novels and history, chief among them the impact made by Sir Walter Scott’s historical novels. A series of connected, crucial changes occurred with the advent of Scott’s historical novel, which led to a new kind of novel and a new kind of historiography. Scott’s historical novel gained a newly invigorated critical respect and veneration for the novel as art form, as Ina Ferris has argued.²¹¹ While the historical novel is often understood as generically hybrid, its “hybridity” is encoded into the very idea of the serious, critically sophisticated novel as it was understood in the nineteenth century. The historical novel, from this perspective, is not an offshoot of the Victorian realist novel—the realist novel is an offshoot of the supposedly mixed form of the historical novel, and the critical protocols of novel reviewing have their origins in reviews of historical novels.

There had, of course, been fictions set in the past before Scott came along with *Waverley*; or, *‘Tis Sixty Years Since* in 1814, notably, many novels set in the Gothic mode. As Ian Duncan points out, however, eighteenth-century Gothic novels are set “not just in the past but in the foreign past, and in historically and culturally enemy territory.”²¹² Moreover, the alien political forces represented are more allegorical than historical. Unlike the works of Scott or of the historians of the Scottish Enlightenment, the historicity of these novels is not “a scientific depiction of past cultural stages under changing material conditions.” Rather, the historical setting is used to make a claim for the ahistoricity of human relations, especially psycho-sexual

²¹⁰ Wedgwood, 903.

²¹¹ Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 10.

²¹² Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and the Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, and Dickens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24.

passions.²¹³ Historical difference in the gothic novel is only used to identify similarity, continuity, and ahistoricity. Scott's historical novels were different, or at least so they seemed to commenters of the time and for long afterward. According to Georg Lukacs, in his foundational analysis on the historical novel, the historical novel before Scott lacked "the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age."²¹⁴ In other words, Scott ushered in an age of new historical self-consciousness, and he did so using a fictional medium and fictional tools.

Scott's invention of the historical novel was in part made possible by his use of unexceptional, middling, average characters as his "heroes." These characters observe, even experience, but rarely take any significant part in the major historical events around them. The protagonists themselves may be ambivalent about such events or crises, while those they come in contact with have strong passions on either side. According to Lukacs, these "wavering" characters allow Scott not only to provide a link between the different sides or views of the historical crisis in question, but also to represent the quotidian aspects of daily life for most regular people during any particular momentous occasion.²¹⁵ This way of representing a historical event or epoch emphasizes progress and historical development, which is a crucial aspect of post-Revolutionary and post-Enlightenment historiography.

Scott influenced novelists and historians alike and significantly blurred the distinction between the two. Thomas Carlyle, arguably one of the most important English historians of the nineteenth century, was deeply influenced not only by Scott's depiction of the Porteous Riots but

²¹³ Duncan, 26-27.

²¹⁴ John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 35.

²¹⁵ Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 17.

by Scott's overall approach to history, and he himself saw the writing of history as a poetic act. Scott's novels, Carlyle suggested,

taught all men this truth, which...was as good as unknown to writers of history and others, till so taught: that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men, not by protocols, state-papers, controversies and abstractions of men.²¹⁶

Carlyle and Macaulay both praised Scott for having made history seem to come alive.²¹⁷ As Mark Phillips points out, eighteenth-century historians had thought in terms of universality, and "their language created ironic distances and detached judgment, not an imaginative identification with the past."²¹⁸ What nineteenth-century historians seem to have learned from Scott, then, is that history, and the recording of history, involves not just Kings and parliaments and not just the Bolingbrokian view of "philosophy by example," which assumes constancy of human behavior, reason, and emotion, but a whole spectrum of social life.

Carlyle's own histories are significantly influenced by the close relationship between history and fiction. According to Rosenberg, Carlyle saw his historical opus, *The French Revolution*, as more of an act of epic inspiration than the chronicling of a Gibbon, whose *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* was one the most influential historical works in modern history. Carlyle's conception of history suggests just how aesthetic, narrative, or even fictional, written histories should be. *The French Revolution*, for instance, begins *in medias res*, in a highly confusing style that irritated a number of its readers. According to Rosenberg, for Carlyle "all

²¹⁶ Thomas Carlyle, "Sir Walter Scott," in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 29 of *The Works of Carlyle*, ed. H. D. Traill, Centenary Ed. (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 77. It's worth noting, however, that in Carlyle's essay on Scott, written on the occasion of the publication of the sixth volume of Lockhart's Scott biography, Carlyle is hardly Scott's biggest fan—he is more interested in the momentous fact of Scott's popularity than in Scott's supposed genius, of which he is largely skeptical.

²¹⁷ Rosenberg, 34.

²¹⁸ Mark Phillips, "Macaulay, Scott, and the Literary Challenge to Historiography," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50, no. 1 (January-March, 1989): 119.

beginnings must be arbitrary, necessary fictions by which the historian shapes into a coherent narrative the ‘ever-fluctuating chaos of the Actual.’”²¹⁹ This approach to the writing of history bears strong resemblance to post-modern theories of representation that explicitly challenge the easy separation of fiction and fact, as in Hayden White’s argument that historiography is narrative and by no means “neutral.”²²⁰ In fact, Carlyle had earlier in his career written a short story/essay called “The Diamond Necklace,” an experiment in “True Fiction” based upon a scandal in the French royal court before the Revolution. As Carlyle wrote to Emerson, “It is part of my creed that the only Poetry is History, could we tell it right.”²²¹ “The Diamond Necklace” was meant to be his attempt to “tell it right,” exploring the relations between fact, fiction, history, and poetry.

Between “The Diamond Necklace” and *The French Revolution*, however, Carlyle’s views had changed somewhat, and he began “to exalt instead the poetry of fact.”²²² In “On Biography,” Carlyle suggests, anticipating other Victorian defenses of fictional prose, that “All Mythologies were once Philosophies; were *believed*: the Epic Poems of old time, so long as they continued *epic* ... were Histories, and understood to be narratives of facts.”²²³ But at this point, rather than confirming him entirely in genre-mixing or total relativism, Carlyle argues, as Rosenberg points out, “that the highest order of creativity is not ‘Fiction’ but the ‘invention of new Truth, what we

²¹⁹ Rosenberg, 55.

²²⁰ Hayden White, “Interpretation in History,” *New Literary History* 4 (Winter 1973): 281-314.

²²¹ Rosenberg, 6.

²²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²²³ Carlyle, “Biography,” in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 28 of *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. H. D. Traill, Centenary Edition (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 49-50.

can call a Revelation.’ The grandest of fictions fades before ‘the smallest historical *fact*.’”²²⁴ Indeed, in *Past and Present*, Carlyle insisted on the gulf separating “the poorest historical Fact from all Fiction whatsoever.”²²⁵ By suggesting that history is poetry, Carlyle now means not that history and poetry are the same, but that history can and ought to fulfill the same purpose for the modern world that epic poetry did for the ancient world.

Thus, we should not overstate the apparent post-modernity of Carlyle’s theories of history. Carlyle’s notable stylistic innovations, such as *The French Revolution*’s variable tense and person, are not intended to suggest the inherent identity of fact and fiction. They *are* different, and Carlyle clearly thought fact superior. But those innovations, and his own experimentation with the boundary between fact and fiction, indicate that history and fictional prose are adjacent—they significantly influence one another, and in certain contexts, the differences are negligible. They can also enhance one another, complement one another. It’s worth noting that, for Carlyle at least, “historical,” “poetic,” and “fictional,” are three terms that, while distinct, significantly overlap, both discursively and historically.

Scott, and the Scott model of history and historical romance, also had a profound impact on Thomas Macaulay, author of a central nineteenth-century work of history, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second*. Macaulay loved fiction, as George Levine has argued, but he insisted on the superiority of history, in part because he could not see what public value imaginative literature might have.²²⁶ He loved fiction, but he also feared it, particularly the historical romance, as it seemed to “do history” better than history. His defenses of history can

²²⁴ Ibid., 53-55.

²²⁵ Carlyle, *Past and Present*, vol. 10 of *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, 46.

²²⁶ George Levine, *The Boundaries of Fiction: Carlyle, Macaulay, Newman* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 109.

be considered manifestoes urging historians to learn from historical fiction and adopt those techniques within the branch of history proper.

As Macaulay explained in an 1828 article in the *Edinburgh Review*, no existing history “approaches to our notion of what a history ought to be,” in part because history itself was a hybrid genre: “It is sometimes fiction. It is sometimes theory,”²²⁷ or as he elsewhere puts it, “History, at least in its state of ideal perfection, is a compound of poetry and philosophy. It impressed general truths on the mind by a vivid representation of particular characters and incidents.”²²⁸ In contrast to later generic divisions that understand history and fiction as two distinct and established categories, history was itself at this period considered somewhat hybrid, a point that should be kept in mind when we consider the historical novel as a mixed genre. History, Macaulay believed, was being divided into the historical romance and the historical essay, with romance actually coming to belong to literature.²²⁹ Macaulay wanted to reclaim romance for history:

To make the past present, to bring the distant near... to invest with the reality of human flesh and blood beings whom we are too much inclined to consider as personified qualities in an allegory...these parts of the duty which properly belongs to the historian have been appropriated by the historical novelist.²³⁰

²²⁷ Thomas Babington Macaulay, “*The Romance of History. England. By Henry Steele*,” *Edinburgh Review* 47, no. 94 (May 1828): 331.

²²⁸ Macaulay, “Review of *The Constitutional History of England, from the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of George II* by Henry Hallam,” in *Essays and Biographies*, vol. 7 of *The Works of Lord Macaulay* (London, Longmans Green and Co, 1897), 221.

²²⁹ Macaulay, “Hallam,” 221.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 221-222.

It especially troubled him that the historical romance was so much more popular among regular readers than the historical essay (or monograph), that “histories of great empires, written by men of eminent ability, lie unread on the shelves of ostentatious libraries.”²³¹

Despite Macaulay’s distrust of fiction, he insisted that the best historian would have many of the skills of the novelist: “He who can invent a story, and tell it well, will also be able to tell, in an interesting manner, a story which he has not invented.”²³² He makes the same point Carlyle does (and later, Hayden White):

Perfectly and absolutely true it cannot be: for to be perfectly and absolutely true, it ought to record *all* the slightest particulars of the slightest transactions—all the things done, and all the words uttered, during the time of which it treats.... No picture, then, and no history, can present us with the whole truth: but those are the best pictures and the best histories which exhibit such parts of the truth as most nearly produce the effect of the whole.²³³

Like Carlyle, Macaulay argues that history should extend beyond its traditional public purview.

The ideal historian is

he in whose work the character and spirit of an age is exhibited in miniature. He relates no fact, he attributes no expression to his character, which is not authenticated by sufficient tendency. But by judicious selection, rejection, and arrangement, he gives to truth those attractions which have been usurped by fiction... He shows us the court, the camp, and the senate. But he shows us also the nation.²³⁴

By “the nation” Macaulay means “the details which are the charm of historical romances,”²³⁵ and particularly those of Sir Walter Scott. If such a perfect historian existed, Macaulay insists, “We

²³¹ Macaulay, “Steele,” 361.

²³² Ibid., 336.

²³³ Ibid., 337-338.

²³⁴ Ibid., 364.

²³⁵ Ibid., 365.

should not then have to look for the wars and votes of the Puritans in Clarendon, and for their phraseology in *Old Mortality*; for one half of King James in Hume, and for the other half in *The Fortunes of Nigel*.”²³⁶

Macaulay’s proposal for a new history was, in fact, identical to the justification I have offered for the historical romance: it could combine the romance—the fantastic, improbable, fanciful—with the reality-alibi and moral superiority of historical fact, which, unlike the novel, was neither useless nor escapist. As Levine puts it:

The writing of great history entailed for him all the qualities which would allow a combination of the “unreal” and the real, of the imagination and of the intelligence. Great history is alone among the literary arts in at once creating an imaginative world and remaining faithful to the real and to the responsibility of knowledge. The unreal world with which history deals was once real; the facts can be verified; the romance of its heroes is to be recognized either as legend and superstition (and thus discarded) or as that paradox lovely to Macaulay—true romance.²³⁷

Macaulay explains in his review of a history by Henry Steele that since fiction is imitative, it must refer only to that with which readers are already familiar.

Hence it is that the anecdotes which interest us most strongly in authentic narrative, are offensive when introduced into novels; that what is called the romance part of history, is in fact the least romantic. It is delightful as history, because it contradicts our previous notions of human nature, and of the connexion of causes and effects. It is, on that very account, shocking and incongruous in fiction.²³⁸

The improbable or unlikely, he seems to be suggesting, looks like aesthetic failure in novels because they make no sense, referring to the problems of causality I discuss in Chapter One; in history, however, improbable incidents are delightful because readers know that they must be true, rather than poor writing. Macaulay’s theory of history seems to be a theory of historical

²³⁶ Macaulay, “Steele,” 365.

²³⁷ Levine, 110.

²³⁸ Macaulay, “Steele,” 339-340.

romance; romance belongs not to the category of fictional prose but to history, and all history should be historical romance. History, if properly done, can offer all the pleasures of fiction and remain a public good while doing so, by virtue of being based in reality. This is what the historical romance often aimed for, but Macaulay believed that it *should* be the province of history proper.

Ultimately, the story of history in the nineteenth century is not the story of its skepticism about the nature of “fact” or “reality,” nor is it the story of the full-scale adoption of fictional techniques. Rather, it is the story of its increasing professionalization and systemization, its adoption of “scientific” methods, which might seem to move it away from its connections with fiction. But as Macaulay’s remarks on the practice of historiography make clear, this redefinition of the field of history is a result of the vacuum in the field left by the historical romance. If the historical romance, and works like the historical romances, were going to so effectively, and with such popularity, express the spirit of the past, then history could either reclaim this territory, as Macaulay hopes, or redefine the methods of historiography. Historians’ increasing need to determine the boundaries and rules of proper historiography was a response to the porousness of those boundaries, especially as perceived by critics, artists, and intellectuals not strictly allied with the movement to professionalize history. It is, after all, the novel reviewers and readers who largely concern me here, and from their perspective history and the novel remained complementary even after Scott’s heyday. The complementarity of the two genres is indicated not only by the ongoing market success of the historical novel—it seems to have been something of a rite of passage for Victorian novelists to try at least one historical novel in their career—but also in the commentary of critics and authors on historical novels.

Historical Fiction and Edward Bulwer Lytton

While Scott's role in the establishment of the historical novel has been thoroughly documented, Edward Bulwer Lytton's commentary on the historical novel is less well known, though crucial in explicitly conceptualizing and articulating the generic boundaries and complementarity between fiction, specifically the novel, and non-fiction, specifically history. Today, Bulwer Lytton's contribution to the genre of the historical novel is less appreciated than it was in the nineteenth century—and there are some good reasons for this (his prose tends to be considered “purple” these days). But Bulwer Lytton attempted some serious revisions to the historical romance as popularized by Scott. In negotiating between the novel and real history, I have suggested, Scott placed real historical figures at the margins of his novels, while his protagonists were distinctly *not* the actors of history, but rather passively subject to historical shifts. This allowed Scott to write about historical events in a fictional way, without contradicting readers' actual knowledge of history. By this account, Scott's marginalization of real historical figures thus “solves” a problem he had just invented: how to novelize history while remaining accurate. In contrast, Bulwer Lytton, on the one hand, explicitly and repeatedly insisted on the historical accuracy of his historical novels, and on the other hand, he often took historical figures as his main characters. Where Scott drew the line between fiction and history with respect to the origins of the persons he was representing (originating in the real world or the fictional world, invented or not invented), Bulwer Lytton identified the distinction between fiction and history *within* particular characters, made possible by a new conception of historical accuracy that entailed a more extensive integration of history and fiction.

In his prefaces and various dedicatory essays and epistles, Bulwer Lytton professed the necessity for total accuracy in the historical novel. Bulwer Lytton's theory was that the novelist should choose either to be entirely accurate or to throw away accuracy altogether “and turn

history into flagrant romance,” as he put it in the dedicatory epistle to *The Last of the Saxon Kings*.²³⁹ His own method, he claimed, was to “employ Romance in the aid of History”: “to construct my plot from the actual events themselves...delineating the characters of those who had been the living actors in the real drama.”²⁴⁰ The “aid” is crucial here—fictionality, in Bulwer Lytton’s account, increases factuality, rather than, for instance, cancelling it out or decreasing it. This approach to the issue was different from the common defense and justification of the historical novel that said that fiction makes history more *palatable* to the average reader, though this was also described in Bulwer Lytton’s prefaces. For Bulwer Lytton the essential relationship is different: the accurate representation of history is the goal, and fiction is a tool to achieve that goal, not simply sugar to help the medicine go down. As Bulwer Lytton explains in the dedicatory epistle to *The Last of the Barons*, fiction “does not pervert but elucidates Facts.”²⁴¹ As a tool, or strategy, fiction can do things that history, as a genre of writing, cannot and does not; it can “illustrate some of those truths which History is too often compelled to leave to the Tale-teller, the Dramatist, and the Poet.”²⁴² By maximizing the capabilities of both genres, Bulwer Lytton believes, or claims to believe, that he can produce a superior representation of a past reality.

It should be noted that Bulwer Lytton’s accuracy was not unimpeachable, and his prefatory statements often make much bolder claims for accuracy than his novels carry out. At the same time, however, Bulwer Lytton uses his prefaces and dedications to actually augment the

²³⁹ Edward Bulwer Lytton, “Dedicatory Epistle to the Right. Hon. C. T. D’eyncourt, M.P.,” *Harold, The Last of the Saxon Kings*, vol. 25 of *Bulwer’s Novels*, Edition de Luxe (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1892), vi.

²⁴⁰ Edward Bulwer Lytton, preface to the 3rd ed., *Harold*, xv.

²⁴¹ Edward Bulwer Lytton, “Dedicatory Epistle,” *The Last of the Barons*, vol. 31 of *Bulwer’s Novels*, v.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, v.

accuracy contained in the novels – to offer clearer accounts of the historical events depicted and to explain where and why he may have departed from these accounts.²⁴³ In the dedication to *The Last of the Barons*, for instance, he makes it known that he is not “taking an unwarrantable liberty with the real facts”; rather, “it is upon the real facts, as far as they can be ascertained, that the author has built his tale, and his boldest inventions are but deductions from the amplest evidence he could collect.”²⁴⁴ He is attempting to teach his readers to correctly read his historical novels, and perhaps all historical novels, to understand that fictional *invention* is actually *deduction* from reality or assured historical fact, and thus not at odds with an overall accuracy. “Where History leaves us in the dark,” he writes, “where our curiosity is the most excited, Fiction gropes amidst the ancient chronicles, and seeks to detect and to guess the truth.”²⁴⁵ It is right and natural, for instance, that the facts connected with the crime of Edward IV should perhaps remain obscure, “that in such obscurity sober History should not venture too far on the hypothesis suggested.” But here is where fiction picks up the thread: fiction “may reasonably help, by no improbable nor groundless conjecture, to render connected and clear the most broken and darkest fragments of our annals.”²⁴⁶

This is one of the services that fiction provides to history: the ability to deduce, that is, the freedom to depict the probable when the actual is out of reach. Bulwer Lytton understands his historical novels as, on the one hand, “illustrat[ing] the actual history of the period,” and on the other hand,

²⁴³ Ibid., xi-xii.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., xix.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., xv.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., xviii-xix.

bring[ing] into fuller display than general History itself has done the characters of the principal personae of the time, the motives by which they were *probably* actuated, the state of parties, the condition of the people, and the great social interests which were involved....²⁴⁷ [emphasis added]

In other words, by using novelistic representational tools on historical materials, historical novelists come close to showcasing history as it actually was, as Macaulay, at least, also believed. For *The Last of the Barons*, for instance, Bulwer Lytton compiled a number of other histories, some less authoritative than others, synthesizing this material into a single account. As a result, he suggests, the reader will obtain a better understanding of this age than he would by “wading through a vast mass of neglected chronicles and antiquarian dissertations.”²⁴⁸ Likewise, he claims to have written *Rienzi: The Last of the Roman Tributes* “as a duty,” finding that the original sources on Rienzi had led to superficial judgments and crude examinations by modern historians. He maintains that his novel may be “a more full and detailed account of the rise and fall of Rienzi than in any English work,”²⁴⁹ whether history or novel, and he justifies his account of Rienzi’s character, which differs from that provided by the historians Gibbon or Sismondi, as being warranted by *both* “the facts of History” and “the laws of Fiction.”²⁵⁰ For Bulwer Lytton, these domains are not entirely distinct; the laws of fiction *support* the facts of history.

This brings me to the second service that fiction provides to history, in Bulwer Lytton’s conception: fiction can depict the private and the personal. Bulwer Lytton strives to relate accurately the public acts of historical record, while he fictionalizes private passions and

²⁴⁷ Bulwer Lytton, preface to *The Last of the Barons*, vol. 31 of *Bulwer’s Novels*, xxiii.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

²⁴⁹ Edward Bulwer Lytton, preface to *Rienzi, The Last of the Roman Tributes*, vol. 19 of *Bulwer’s Novels*, vii-viii.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, vii-viii.

incidents, which are “the legitimate *appanage* of novelist or poet.”²⁵¹ The legitimate privileges of fiction are in “that inward life which not only [is] apart from the more public and historical, but which [is] almost wholly unknown.”²⁵² While the “modern historian” must treat personal, private passions “amongst the dubious and collateral causes of dissension,” fiction can seize “upon the paramount importance” of such facts.²⁵³ What unites the two functions of fiction—the ability to depict the private and the ability to deduce—is that both depend on what is unknown to history. Fiction fills in the gaps left by the historical record; it “invents the Probable where it discards the Real.”²⁵⁴

In short, Bulwer Lytton’s prefaces offer a series of ways in which the novel and history complement one another. Though his insistence on accuracy might seem to suggest a greater separation of the two genres, he redefines historical accuracy not only to include select elements of novelistic representation but to require them. He repeatedly insists that the novel and historical accuracy are in no way opposed, by pointing out just how accurate his own novels are and by essentially producing new historical research in the form of novels. He also identifies several ways in which fiction “completes” or augments history. First, as Carlyle and Macaulay both realized, using novelistic techniques in an otherwise strictly historical account can serve to enhance the appearance of reality and the sensation of experiencing the past, and it can provide the reader a better sense of the “spirit” of a particular period or culture. It can also make history more memorable and enjoyable for readers, which, as other critics note, is good for the edification of the nation’s readers. Second, fiction can enter into obscure or unknown regions of

²⁵¹ Ibid., vii.

²⁵² Bulwer Lytton, “Dedicatory Epistle,” *The Last of the Barons*, xiv-xv.

²⁵³ Ibid., xv.

²⁵⁴ Bulwer Lytton, preface to the 3rd ed., *Harold*, xv.

historical study and make suppositions and hypotheses, where strict history can often only say what is known for certain. History's realm is certainty, or near certainty—fiction's is probability, possibility, deduction, and qualified invention. This power of fiction serves to enhance history. Third, fiction, with a different area of expertise, can explore the personal, private, and passionate aspects of people's lives—areas that require imaginative leaps, and where history, generally speaking, cannot or will not go. This particular power of fiction augments the previous point—fiction can make suppositions and hypotheses based on imaginative empathy for historical figures. In short, history needs the fictional.

Characters, Historical and Otherwise

One of the reasons that the genres of history and the novel went so well together was that like the novel, history as a genre is textual, or narrative. The “history” of historical novels was not identical to reality. This point becomes especially important when it comes to the portrayal of fictional characters and historical figures, and in particular, historical figures within fictions. Many later theorists have become interested in such figures—notably, Napoleon in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*—because such figures seem to be non-fictions within fictions, as I explore below. As twentieth-century theorists will attest, such figures help us define the boundaries of fictionality.

The representation of historical figures in historical novels, and more importantly, the discourse around that representation, helps to identify some of the implicit generic assumptions that allow this complementarity, and to explain the practice of indignant reading. Victorian novelists and critics understand such figures differently than twentieth-century theorists do. Bulwer Lytton's prefaces and other commentary indicate that historical figures were not treated simply as fictional characters; his theories about how the novel and history fit together mean that

the non-fictionality, the factuality, of a historical figure must be respected. But in Victorian fictional aesthetics, the same could be said for a fictional character. Many of the demands made of the representation of historical figures are actually identical or analogous to the demands made of the representation of fictional characters. Rather than the one treated as real and the other as invented, both are treated as a combination of the two. The Bulwer Lytton model of character that I have outlined above is not new when it comes to fictional characters; his innovation was actually in the theory of historical accuracy that allowed him to treat historical figures as fictional, while fictional figures have long been treated as “historical.”

As I have suggested, nineteenth-century critics, writers, and readers were regularly concerned about the misrepresentation of historical figures, just as they were about the misrepresentation of historical events—this is why Scott marginalized his historical figures. A critic for *Bentley's* in 1859 explains this reasoning and the dangers of misrepresentation:

[I]f our idea of the person in question be not vague and misty, but definite and determined, the result (so to speak) of accumulated studies and impressions, then is the risk of discontent and failure signally increased. For it is the characters most fully portrayed in history which each man has “pictured to himself with most precision, and therefore those of which he is least likely to appreciate another man’s imaginary portraits. The image in our own minds is disturbed, and we feel something of the disappointment we experience when we find some one of whom we have heard much very different from what we had imagined him to be.” Hence the critic’s conclusion, that the more intimately and generally an historic character is known, the more unfit it must be for the purposes of fiction.²⁵⁵

The critic is repeating the oft-made point that a historical novelist is “safer” if he limits himself to the lesser known historical figures.²⁵⁶ But in unfolding this point, the critic clarifies that this is less about accuracy than it is about knowledge. It is not that the author limits his chances of

²⁵⁵ “Of Novels Historical and Didactic,” *Bentley's Miscellany* 46 (July 1859): 44.

²⁵⁶ George Saintsbury, “The Historical Novel. II.—Scott and Dumas,” *Macmillan's Magazine* 70, no. 419 (September 1894): 326.

erring against truth—rather, he limits his chances of erring against readers’ preconceived notions of the historical figures, ideas that are better described as discursive (“the result...of accumulated studies and impressions”) than factual.

Similarly, G. H. Lewes, in 1846, warns his readers that a historical novelist must not “misrepresent [...] historical personages,” but then adds,

This applies only to such persons whose characters are tolerably known to us. If the epoch be remote, and the characters dimly perceived, the novelist has perfect license.... Assured that we must be as ignorant as himself, he can invent his materials and create his characters.²⁵⁷

Misrepresentation is a question of knowledge and familiarity, not fact, reality, or truth. If history is truly uncertain, then it is no different from fiction—and all history is, to different degrees, uncertain.

Even critics who, unlike Lewes or Bulwer Lytton, object to the commingling of fiction and history in historical fiction do not distinguish fundamentally between the natures of the respective objects of representation. A critic of the *Contemporary Review* makes this claim with respect to *Leonora Casaloni: A Novel*.

The assumption of fiction is that you know,--*how we do not care*; the assumption of biography is that you know, *by means of which you inform us*; but in a mixture of biography and fiction, or history and fiction, we are tossed about between the assumptions of the two kinds of knowledge.²⁵⁸ [Emphasis in the original]

The major difference between the historical/truthful and the fictional is not ontological but epistemological—not *what* you know, but *how*. At no point does this critic suggest any difficulty or problem of mixing fictional beings with real ones, only confusion over the sources of the

²⁵⁷ G. H. Lewes, “*The Foster Brother; a Tale of the War of Chiozza*,” *Westminster Review* 45, no. 1 (March 1846): 37-38.

²⁵⁸ M B, “*Leonora Casaloni: A Novel*,” *Contemporary Review* 11 (May 1869): 467.

critic's knowledge; the implication is that fictional beings and events are in many ways equivalent to real ones, only understood through different means. This is why the critic of *Bentley's* is less concerned with the reality or historicity of the figure in the text and more with his/her relative fame.

As a result of this perspective, historical and fictional characters are really not that different, and their differences are not that important. A *Time* article from 1879 distinguishes between fictional characters and historical characters as such:

[I]nstead of making new acquaintances in the characters depicted by the author, we recognize old friends, whom we have known under different aspects, and about whom we are told something new; whether what we are told be historically true or not is immaterial to our pleasure in the story.²⁵⁹

There's no ontological difference between historical figures and real characters implied or imagined here—no difference from reading a Trollope or Oliphant novel and coming across new characters intermingling with those from previous novels by the same author. In fact, critics regularly referred to such characters who novel-hopped across chronicles or series as “old friends” readers might “recognize.” For instance, an 1876 review of Trollope's *The Prime Minister*, the fifth of the six Palliser novels, notes that “old characters with which we have already some acquaintance are more interesting than new. It is like meeting old friends whom we have not met for some years, and who have made for themselves in the interval a story worth telling.”²⁶⁰ The rhetoric is exactly the same, whether discussing historical figures appearing in novels or fictional characters reappearing in new novels.

Similarly, reviews of Bulwer Lytton's historical novel, *Eugene Aram*, object in part to Bulwer's representation of Aram, not so much on the grounds of historical accuracy as on the

²⁵⁹ “Some Historical Novels,” *Time* 13, no. 11 (November 1885): 574.

²⁶⁰ “Mr. Trollope's *Prime Minister*,” *The Examiner* 3573 (July 22, 1876): 826.

grounds of his novelistic consistency. The *Edinburgh Review*'s critic notes the advantages and disadvantages of the subject: "strong interest on the one hand—the difficulty of dealing with a character which has already assumed a fixed colour and body to the imagination on the other."²⁶¹ This supports my claim that the difference between historical figures and fictional characters is understood to be epistemological rather than ontological. Eugene Aram was a scholar and philologist of humble birth in the early-mid eighteenth century who was suspected in a man's disappearance in 1734 but wasn't brought to trial until 1758; he was hanged the following year. Prior to Bulwer Lytton's novel, he was the subject of a ballad by Thomas Hood. He was, then, a well-known figure, though the details of his motives have remained a mystery. Bulwer Lytton took license with some aspects of Aram's biography; notably, while the real Aram married young, prior to the crime, Bulwer Lytton represents Aram as a single man long after the crime, until meeting and falling in love with a young woman only just before the crime is discovered. While the critic objects in part to Bulwer Lytton's liberties, this has little to do with *accuracy*—it has to do with Bulwer Lytton's conception of Aram as a character, whether historical or fictional. The critic argues that because the conventions of the novel demand a romantic hero, Bulwer Lytton has made Aram a lover. But for such a lover to be a murderer is a "moral anomaly":

To conceive the real Aram as a lover, an enthusiast, is of course an impossibility. He plainly had no love to spare for any but himself, and dwelt in no world but that of realities.... Yet Mr Bulwer has represented him in the romantic garb of a refined lover, of an enthusiastic scholar, living quite as much in the deal as the actual world. Has he then sunk the murder entirely, or explained it away? Has he altered the motive? Neither. This romantic enthusiast is, after all, a murderer, and *for money!*²⁶²

²⁶¹ "Eugene Aram: a Tale," *Edinburgh Review* 55, no. 109 (April 1832): 213-214.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 215.

The contrast between Aram's scholarship and love for Madeline, the latter of which is Bulwer's invention, with the financial motives of his purported crime is impossible, unrealistic. Likewise, the critic continues,

Making every allowance for our ignorance of the many unexplored recesses of the heart, and the strange contradictions which real life does occasionally present, we must say, we find it altogether impossible to reconcile ourselves to the idea of an enthusiastic scholar committing murder, with an eye to the interests of science, and commencing his career of social improvement, by helping himself to the purse of the first person who happens to appear to him useless or detrimental to society.²⁶³

Does the critic object to Bulwer Lytton's *creation* of Aram, or to his interpretation/representation of Aram? Ultimately, this distinction is moot. Because the same rules of plausibility apply to historical figures and fictional characters, even in a romance (at least one based in history), such objections to Aram's behavior and psychology in the novel could just as easily be made to a work of complete fiction or to a historical interpretation of the real Aram.

Bulwer Lytton's discussion of his own use of historical figures suggests too that what is at issue is what is *known* of the person in question. The public persona cannot (or should not) be contradicted, but as for what is *not* known of the figure, the plausible and the possible are just as good. Bulwer-Lytton claims that his fictionalization attempted to illustrate what he "believed to be the genuine natures of the beings who had actually lived...."²⁶⁴ He uses both historical and fictional powers of research, deduction, and invention to determine these "genuine natures." Bulwer's attempt at "fidelity" to the natures of actual people may be equivalent, even identical, to the fidelity that authors are often understood to owe to their own creations (a fidelity I discuss in the previous chapter). For instance, in an essay on historical novels, already cited, the critic

²⁶³ Ibid., 215-216. This apparent moral impossibility was, of course, what Bulwer Lytton sought to explore in the novel.

²⁶⁴ Bulwer Lytton, preface to the 3rd ed., *Harold*, xv.

turns to a discussion of Eliot's historical novel, *Romola*. But Eliot, the critic notes, is not faithful to her own representation of Romola, a fictional character: "A woman so noble and high-minded as she is represented to be would have seen through Tito Melema in an instant, just as Bernardo del Nero or Piero di Cosimo did."²⁶⁵ Bulwer Lytton's more stringent approach to historical figures—his insistence on accuracy—might seem to suggest a firm distinction between fictional and real beings, but in the context of Victorian novel criticism, he may only be asking for the "fidelity" owed to all characters, whether fictional or historical.

And just as fictional characters are discussed as if they are historical figures, so too are historical figures discussed as if they are fictional characters. In Macaulay's review of Henry Steele's *The Romance of History*, an excuse for a general discussion of the history of history and how history ought to be done, Macaulay critiques the historiography of Sallust in exactly the same terms as a reviewer of novels, doubting the "fairness" of the narrative:

Catiline, *we are told*, intrigued with a Vestal virgin, and murdered his own son.... Yet this is the man with whom Cicero was willing to coalesce in a contest for the first magistracy of the republic.... *We are told* that the plot was the most wicked and desperate ever known, and almost in the same breath, that the great body of the people, and many of the nobles favoured it....²⁶⁶ [Emphasis added]

Macaulay continues along these lines, using the same strategies of novel reviewers to doubt the coherence—the probability—of what he has been told.

If the Victorians had a theory of fictionality, it is one that sees the novel as similar to historical writing. The two greatest concerns for critics and writers of historical fiction were fidelity (to persons and events) and probability (of persons and events). Each of these terms has arisen in my discussion of indignant reading—fidelity and fair representation is the crux of

²⁶⁵ "Some Historical Novels," *Time*, 579-580.

²⁶⁶ Macaulay, "Steele," 349-350.

indignant responses to characterization, while probability and chance are central to indignant responses to plot. The desire for “impartiality” in history is akin to the impartiality demanded of novelists – if the practice indignant reading reveals anything, it is that “fairness” is something regularly demanded of writers.

If fictions are understood on the model of historical texts, then it only makes sense to consider the role and perspective of the author. There is thus little space for the illusion of fictional autonomy—the idea that fictional representations emerge from the world independently of any particular person, and that decisions made about the fiction do not come from the personal motivations and needs of any writers or producers. It is the illusion of fictional autonomy that tends to make indignant reading seem contradictory or paradoxical, that seems to suggest that thinking of the author while emotionally engaged with the fiction is a form of doublethink, which can only be resolved by pretense or illusion. Nobody pretends that a piece of historical scholarship or a historical chronicle does not have an author, nor that the effect of such a text depends upon pretending that there is no author, nor that the characters described therein are not representations of people. If there *is* a contradiction, paradox, or illusion necessarily involved in this approach to fiction, it is significant that Victorians did not, on the whole, view it in these terms.

Paradoxes of Fiction in the Twentieth Century

While the Victorian approach to fiction is defined by continuity and adjacency, the modern approach is defined by binaries and paradoxes. Indeed, it is primarily in twentieth-century accounts of fiction that indignant reading seems contradictory or paradoxical, with the illusion of fictional autonomy behind many modern theories of fiction. At the theoretical level, at

least, we live in an age of fictional exceptionalism. Many common responses to fiction—especially those involving intense emotional engagement—are understood to be initially inexplicable within the normative realms of philosophy, language, and psychology, and non-normative theories must be developed for such responses.

A number of factors account for the change in approach in the twentieth century. For one, with the academicization of English studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the center of critical authority moved from authors and reviewers to academics, scholars, and philosophers. As such, criticism became less practical and more theoretical. Victorian fictional theory was developed through the production and critique of specific novels—modern fictional theory has grown increasingly more abstract. The publication of L. C. Knights' *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?* in 1933 is both a sign of this tendency and a cause of its expansion. Knights' polemic targeted the idea that it is the main function of writers to create characters and of critics to discuss those characters as people, a relic of the previous century, when the growth of the popular novel encouraged "an emotional identification of the reader with hero and heroine."²⁶⁷ Instead, he argued, characters should be considered what they are: words. This is the difference between good criticism and bad criticism (or pseudo criticism): "the good critic points to something that is actually contained in the work of art, whereas the bad critic points away from the work in question; he introduces extraneous elements into his appreciation...."²⁶⁸ Knights thus urges a turn away from Victorian character-based criticism and toward more text-based approaches, which tend to de-emphasize emotional involvement and aim

²⁶⁷ Knights, 25.

²⁶⁸ Knights, 33.

to shatter the “illusion” of character, and he underscores a new (or renewed) hierarchy of literary criticism.

The periodical critics of the nineteenth century are not fully equivalent to twentieth-century philosophers and literary scholars—in some functions, they are much more like twentieth-century literary reviewers. But they *were* the source of authoritative discourse on fiction and aesthetics until the role of the scholar and the role of the reviewer were firmly separated in the twentieth century. The separation of the job of taste-making and the job of scholarship and interpretation is part of what Knights was identifying and encouraging.

Additionally, a number of strands of nineteenth-century philosophy came together in the twentieth century and made fiction (as distinct from aesthetics) a valid topic of investigation and inquiry. Philosophically, there was a great deal of skepticism about fiction and an insistence on the non-existence of fiction, as signified by the theorization of fiction within the realm of analytic philosophy. Most twentieth-century theories of fiction begin from this point—fictions do not exist. And it is no doubt true that fictions do not exist! But when this is the foundation, the basis, the start of any theory of fiction, it seems likely that at least apparent contradictions will follow, if only because, while fictions do not exist, we still interact with them. Many modern theories of fiction, then, struggle to explain the contradiction that arises as a result of those same theories of fiction.

Paradox, Illusions, and Belief

The modern approach to fiction is thus characterized by a reliance on paradox and a reliance on illusion. The primary paradox in question is the paradox of fiction and emotion (sometimes called the paradox of fictional emotion, or simply the paradox of fiction), though it was not explicitly formulated until the second half of the twentieth century. How is it possible,

the paradox asks, for readers to feel genuine emotions toward characters or plots when they know that they are fictional? Why would a reader feel concern over a character's fate when the character is merely the creation of someone's imagination?

On the face of it, it would seem that belief in the reality of something is required for emotion about it.²⁶⁹ When a friend tells you about the death of her brother, you may feel quite sad, but if she then tells you that in fact she has no brother, the only emotions you're likely to feel are anger at her, and certainly no emotions toward the imaginary brother. Likewise, in Colin Radford's example, a person may be moved to grief or anger when reading an account of the horrible sufferings of a group of people, but if he/she discovers that the account was false, he/she would cease to grieve for these people—there would be no reason to.²⁷⁰ According to accounts of the paradox, rational readers know that fictions are not fact, but we emote toward fictions anyway, which thus involves us in paradox.²⁷¹

This is the explanation of fiction that is often (though by no means always) resorted to by modern critics today, and by many others, often in a casual or implicit fashion. Fiction is an illusion in which we temporarily “forget” about reality. Noel Carroll characterizes such theories as “illusion theories” of fiction.²⁷² We are deceived, albeit temporarily, into believing that the fiction is actually real. In many cases, such theories are invoked in a backwards way, not through the explicit suggestion that we are deceived by fiction but through the suggestion that to be reminded of a fiction's fictionality is to reduce the power—the illusion—of that fiction. Such

²⁶⁹ Gregory Currie notes that that view that emotions are essentially belief-involving is called “cognitivism.” Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 183.

²⁷⁰ Radford, 68.

²⁷¹ Robert J. Yanal, *Paradoxes of Fiction and Emotion* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 11.

²⁷² Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 63.

claims imply that fiction does indeed rest on an illusion, or at least a temporary forgetting of the reality of the fiction's status. Illusion theories of fiction entirely fail to explain indignant reading, or responses *like* indignant reading. Indignant readers know very well that fiction is fiction, and their interest in the author's creative choices surely constitutes a reminder of reality. If an indignant reader were told that her emotion was needless because the fictional character is only fiction, she could only respond, "I know, but still."

It is because of these assumptions about fiction that we often remind students who are too invested, for example, in the future of Elizabeth Bennet, that Elizabeth Bennet is not real. Or if, perhaps, a child were distraught over the death of Bambi's mother, we might calm her by assuring her that *Bambi* is not real. It is often assumed that readers' emotional involvement is with the represented reality, as opposed to the artifact itself, and once a reader remembers that that reality is *only* represented, that it is *merely* the product of some person's imagination or pen, he or she will become less emotionally involved—after all, Bambi's mother did not die, because she never existed.

Encoded in such illusion theories is often the illusion of fictional autonomy—the illusion that the fiction has *not* been created or invented, that it is not an artifact. Consider the film *Misery*, based on the Stephen King novel of the same name. Annie Wilkes, Kathy Bates' character, accuses author Paul Sheldon of murdering his character Misery. Annie seems to believe that Misery is a real person who can die, or whose death is worth grieving over, but she also clearly knows that Paul is responsible for everything in the fiction. That Annie Wilkes is deranged suggests the importance of the illusion of fictional autonomy to many common assumptions about fiction. She is a living (or rather, fictional) embodiment of the paradox of fiction and emotion. Annie Wilkes' insanity is, it would seem, a result of this paradox. Emotional

response to fiction and awareness of the role of the creator seem to be contradictory. And so many solutions to the paradox suggest that readers temporarily, or provisionally, “forget” that the fiction is a fiction, or pretend that it is real—that is, engage in the illusion of fictional autonomy and the illusion of fiction in general.

Attempts to resolve or clarify these problems are usually classified as “thought theories” because they rest upon explanations of the nature of belief and disbelief, especially in the context of emotion, rather than direct explanation of the nature of fictional beings or events. Thought Theories, first categorized and described by Noel Carroll in his 1990 work, *A Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, argue that belief is not necessary for emotion and that imagining something without belief (holding it in thought, doubting, suspecting, or wondering something) can spark emotion in the imager or thinker.²⁷³

Thought theorists thus consider Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s concept of the suspension of disbelief to be the “original” thought theory. Coleridge first suggested this concept in 1816 in order to explain and justify how it was that his own contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, a work created in conjunction with William Wordsworth, came to focus on the supernatural:

[I]t was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.²⁷⁴

Coleridge’s theory of the suspension of disbelief has become one of the most frequent sources of explanation for the particularly modern questions raised by fictionality. How do we respond to fictions as though they were real? We suspend our disbelief in the fiction, many would and do

²⁷³ Yanal, 87.

²⁷⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 6.

respond. How do we emote toward imagined beings? We suspend our disbelief. Readers do not *really* believe that fictions are real—rather, they have suspended (“for the moment”) their *disbelief* in those fictions.

Thought Theories particularly emphasize Coleridge’s follow-up discussion of the suspension of disbelief in which the dreaming state is taken as a model for the experience of art.

The poet does not require us to be awake and believe; he solicits us only to yield ourselves to a dream; and this, too, with our eyes open, and with our judgment *perdue* behind the curtain, ready to awaken us at the first motion of our will; and meantime, only, not to disbelieve.²⁷⁵

We neither believe nor disbelieve, but are in a state of receptivity to any impression. We can contemplate or respond without committing to its existence or nonexistence—we suspend not only disbelief but also belief. Thought theorists also emphasize Coleridge’s follow-up account of the suspension of disbelief in a letter, in which he argued that “Images and Thoughts possess a power in and of themselves, independent of that act of the Judgement or Understanding by which we affirm or deny the existence of a reality correspondent to them.”²⁷⁶ Dreamers, spectators, and readers provisionally defer the question of belief or disbelief in the reality or unreality of a dream, play, or fiction. Fiction thus requires a special cognitive state.

Thought Theorists, then, attempt to explain *how* we can defer belief, how and with what mechanisms we can neither affirm nor deny the existence or reality of something. Carroll suggests that the answer is in the difference between a belief and a thought, that is, in the nature of assertion. A belief is “a proposition held in the mind as asserted,” in which the thinker is committed to the truth of that proposition. A thought is a proposition that is held in the mind unasserted, as when one is imagining a hypothetical. We can “entertain thought-content” and

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 218.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 6.

“understand the meaning of the proposition” without taking it as an assertion and therefore remain neutral as to its truth value—this is the imagination.²⁷⁷ Gregory Currie offers a similar distinction between occurrent belief and non-occurrent belief:

We may actively, occurrently, disbelieve a proposition; we may have the falsity of that proposition vividly before our minds. Usually we do not disbelieve the propositions of a fiction in this sense, at least while we are attending to the story. But there are many things we disbelieve at a given time without occurrently disbelieving them.... We dispositionally, rather than occurrently, disbelieve the propositions of a fiction.²⁷⁸

To willingly suspend one’s disbelief is to suspend our occurrent disbelief, Currie would seem to suggest. Readers or audience members “dispositionally” know fictions are not real but this knowledge does not interfere with the experience of the fiction. Emotions, then, do not necessarily involve active, occurrent belief, nor do they necessitate assertion.

Thought Theory may seem to resolve many of the philosophical difficulties raised by fiction, and even to explain indignant reading, but like many modern interpretations of the suspension of disbelief, it runs into complexities, perhaps irresolvable, when trying to clarify the nature of readers’ belief or disbelief at the entrance to the fiction—the key moment for a theory of fictionality. What happens when one encounters a fictional representation? At what point does judgment come into play when one is willingly suspending one’s disbelief? Does the reader immediately categorize it as either real or fictional, enacting an important judgment, and then suspend or activate disbelief accordingly? Or does the reader refuse to make that judgment at all, and is this refusal what is meant by the suspension of disbelief?

Thought theorists tend to struggle over such questions. Michael Weston rejects the suspension of belief because “in attending to fiction we are not in a situation in which the truth,

²⁷⁷ Noel Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 273.

²⁷⁸ Currie, 8.

in the sense which could involve our belief, of what we see or read is even raised.”²⁷⁹ Robert Yanal argues against Coleridge’s “paralysis” of the power of judgment because the reader (or spectator) who takes a character to be fiction “has *already* rendered a judgment.”²⁸⁰ Carroll makes a similar point:

For how will we know to suspend our disbelief unless we realize that the work before us is a fiction? That is, supposing that we can will to suspend disbelief in some special way that is appropriate to fiction, we will still have to know and to believe we are confronting a fiction—a concatenation of persons and events that do not exist—in order for us to correctly mobilize any processes of psychological suspension.²⁸¹

To determine whether a text or character is fictional or real is to use the power of judgment that Coleridge says is paralyzed by fiction.

This confusion is quite significant in the context of the nineteenth-century interpretation of the idea of the suspension of disbelief. For most Victorian critics, the suspension of disbelief is a theory of the supernatural, or from another point of view, a theory of the realistic. It helps to explain what happens when a reader encounters something particularly improbable or fantastic in an otherwise “realistic” fictional representation, or when a reader encounters a fantastic text instead of a realistic one. That is, the suspension of disbelief is not about fiction and reality, but about the difference between two different *kinds* of fiction: the realistic and the romantic. It is thus not a theory of the fictional at all, for the boundary between fiction and reality, which trips up Thought Theorists, is not under question or analysis. This distinction is characteristic of the difference between Victorian and modern approaches to fiction: where modern critics might try

²⁷⁹ Michael Weston, “How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?: Part II,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 4 (1975): 83.

²⁸⁰ Yanal, 91.

²⁸¹ Carroll, *Horror*, 67.

to investigate the difference between fiction and nonfiction, Victorian critics tend to think in terms of the difference between realism and romance, the probable and the improbable. This inter-fictional difference, as I have suggested, was just as important as an intra-fictional difference.

This may explain why the concept of the suspension of disbelief, though put forth in 1816, did not capture the Victorian critical imagination as it did theorists and readers of the twentieth century. Before the twentieth century, there are few instances of the use of the phrase “suspension of disbelief” in British periodical criticism. When discussed, it was almost always in the context of discussion of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and *Lyrical Ballads*; it was rarely exported to other contexts.²⁸² In these discussions, it was interpreted as a justification for the use of the supernatural in poetry—not about fiction and non-fiction but about the realistic and the supernatural.²⁸³ The fact that a theory of the suspension of disbelief is not *required* in order to understand the difference between the supernatural and the plausible may explain why Coleridge’s theory garnered relatively little critical interest among nineteenth-century critics.

What is under question in the Victorian interpretation of the phrase is what happens when the reader, having already entered the fictional world or begun engaging with the fictional representation, contemplates something that does not seem to belong and considers *leaving* that fictional world (the metaphor of “world” here is by no means innocent or necessary, as I discuss

²⁸² In several such cases, though the phrase is quoted, it is given no special attention by the critic. See, for instance, “New Edition of Wordsworth’s Poetical Works,” *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country* 6, no. 34 (November 1834): 607-725; “Wordsworth’s New Poems,” *Dublin University Magazine* 5, no. 30 (June 1835): 680-705; Kineton Parkes, “The Modern Romantic Ballad,” *New Century Review* 4, no. 21 (September 1898): 176-184.

²⁸³ An 1871 article understands the phrase as justifying poetry “which should deal with the supernatural and invisible” (“A Century of Great Poets from 1750 Downwards,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 110, no. 673 [November 1871]: 567). For other critics interpreting the “suspension of disbelief” as a justification of the supernatural, see “*English Men of Letters*, edited by John Morley Coleridge,” *Edinburgh Review* 162, no. 332 (October 1885): 301-351.

below). This is why it is a theory about *disbelief*, rather than belief—it assumes a state of passive belief in the fiction, until it is interrupted. As Carroll suggests when he dismisses the suspension of disbelief as a viable theory of fiction,

belief is required in order to will the suspension of disbelief. The suspension of disbelief does not get rid of the problem. At best it relocates the contradiction by moving it back a step. It is not a solution to the problem but rather an obfuscatory redescription, at one remove, of the problem.²⁸⁴

Thus, the attempt by modern critics to expand the principle of the suspension of disbelief, through analogy, to the fictional situation in general, must necessarily run into these crucial questions not otherwise activated by the principle.

In fact, analysis of the reading experiences of Victorians also suggests that they did not suspend their disbelief at all. They *used* their disbelief as a critical tool. Victorian novel reviewers approached fiction with a great deal of skepticism, as many of the examples discussed in previous chapters suggest. Consider the critical approach to characterization. Critics were all too ready to declare a character a failure given a mismatch between what they infer the author intended a character to be and how it actually appeared. Julia Wedgwood, for instance, writing for the *Contemporary Review*, commented on the novel *The Right Honourable*:

[W]e gather that [the author's] intention is to paint a character to which the [title] words may be applicable in a deeper meaning. And yet this peerless knight, seeing that the woman to whom he has been attracted from the first is miserable with her husband, and, knowing the precipice on which she stands, lets her know that he loves her! Is this Mr. McCarthy's idea of the demeanour of a strong and honourable man towards a weak girl?²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ Carroll, *Horror*, 67.

²⁸⁵ Wedgwood, "Fiction," 903.

The typical critical attitude is to point out the discrepancy between the fictional world a text aims to project and the one it actually did produce—in other words, to *disbelieve* the fictional illusion. Moreover, in consistently blaming the author, critics are certainly not under the illusion that the world projected by the fiction is some kind of free-standing alternate universe. The entire critical premise of indignant reading is based on the knowledge, not the forgetting, that the fiction is a textual artifact by the author. This knowledge—this unsuspended disbelief—does not prevent the critics from speaking about characters as if they were real, and sometimes seeming to emote toward them as if they were real. In contrast, modern theories of fiction seem to divide readers into credulous naïfs and knowing skeptics.

Bertrand Russell and Possible Worlds

Prior to the mid to late eighteenth century, I have suggested, the truth of fiction was a crucial, and dichotomizing, question, while the issue became somewhat less significant for much of the nineteenth century. The question of truth was picked up again by Bertrand Russell in the early twentieth century with the advent of analytic philosophy. Russell's theory of descriptions, first set out in 1905,²⁸⁶ suggests that because fictional beings have no existing referent, all statements about them are necessarily logically false or spurious (it should be noted that true/false is a slightly different dichotomy than truth/lies). In this view, there is no logical difference between a sentence referring to a fictional character and a sentence proposing a counterfactual. To borrow Thomas Pavel's example, "Mr. Pickwick is wise" is false, as is "If George VI had been a first-born son he would have made a wise king"²⁸⁷—and both are as false as any particular lie. In such a philosophy, fiction must always be false, or untrue. Russell's

²⁸⁶ Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *Mind* 14, no.56 (October 1905): 479-493.

²⁸⁷ Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 43.

theories and their consequences inaugurated two distinct approaches to fictionality: fiction as a question of language, and fiction as a question of existence.

Russell's philosophy of language raised problems for philosophers interested in fictional beings and fictional language. For one thing, it was unable to differentiate (in terms of truth value) between the statement, "Little Nell dies," and the statement, "Little Nell lives happily ever after," which seemed to many to be problematic for an account of fictionality. Both have a non-existent referent, so both are false, but surely one is more "false" than the other, or at least false in a different way.

Faced with these conundrums, a number of philosophers in the 1960s turned to modal logic—a branch of philosophy applying formal logic to modalities, words that qualify propositions—to distinguish between different kinds of non-existence or inactuality. This entailed the development of "possible worlds" theory, one of the more vibrant areas of thinking about fictionality in the twentieth century, though no longer in favor as much it was two decades ago. Possible worlds theory posits that actual world in which we all live is one among many possible worlds in which other states of affairs attain, which may be more or less like the actual worlds; this supposition allows us to evaluate counterfactuals, rather than declaring them all equally false. We might evaluate the statement, "If George VI had been a first-born son he would have made a wise king," by turning to the possible worlds most similar to the actual world in which George VI was born a first-born son. In those very similar worlds, if George VI made a wise king, then the counterfactual is true; if in any of those worlds he did not make a wise king, then the counterfactual should be evaluated as false.

Possible worlds theory has been used to theorize about fiction; the fictional “world” created by a text may be considered a kind of possible world.²⁸⁸ *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in this view, creates or describes a possible world in which Mr. Pickwick and Little Nell both exist, as well as a London very similar to the actual London. Though many differ over the implications of these views, fictional worlds theory usually encourages a distinction between the fictional and the actual through understanding the fictional as existing in a different (ontologically and otherwise) and incompatible mode from the actual. The London of Mr. Pickwick and Little Nell is just like the real London, a replica identical except for the presence of Mr. Pickwick or Little Nell (and all the other changes consequent upon these changes)—but a replica nonetheless.

Although there is much to unpack and explain about this approach to fiction, my interest here is in how possible worlds theory explains—or rather, struggles to explain—a phenomenon like indignant reading, so natural to Victorian readers. One of the key issues here is how the fictional world relates to the actual world, a question of some debate among proponents of possible worlds theory. While there is significant disagreement among different critics and philosophers as to the precise nature of this relationship, most accounts suggest a strict separation and distinction between them, which has significant consequences for interpretations of historical figures in fictional texts—an important criterion in a given theory of fictionality—and of the role of the author.

David Lewis, a proponent of modal realism, in which possible worlds are thought actually to exist elsewhere in the universe, suggests that there is no ontological difference

²⁸⁸ While some philosophers treat fictional worlds as additional possible worlds, others (literary critics in particular) adopt a possible-worlds approach but note some important distinctions between fictional and possible worlds. Ruth Ronen and Marie-Laure Ryan both observe that fictional worlds belong to a different sphere of possibility and impossibility. Since fictional characters can create their own modalities—can speculate, doubt, and produce counterfactuals—then fictional worlds must have their possible worlds. This is what Ryan has termed “fictional re-centering.” Nonetheless, both Ronen and Ryan agree with other accounts of fictional/possible worlds in viewing them as entirely distinct from the real world, analogous and parallel.

between possible worlds and the actual world.²⁸⁹ Many philosophers disagree with this approach and propose other ontological relationships; for instance, Nicholas Rescher proposes regarding possible worlds as constructs of the mind, which entails an ontological distinction between objects in possible worlds and objects in the actual world.²⁹⁰ But in both of these cases, despite differing significantly, the possible world of a fiction is not part of the real world. As Ruth Ronen suggests,

[F]acts of the actual world have no a priori ontological privilege over facts of the fictional world. The fictional world system is *an independent system* whatever the type of fiction constructed and the extent of its drawing on our knowledge of the actual world. Since fictional worlds are autonomous, they are not more or less fictional according to degrees of affinity between fiction and reality: facts of the actual world are not constant reference points for the facts of fiction.²⁹¹ [Emphasis added]

The fictional world “is not a possible world *ramifying* from the actual state of affairs, but a world logically and ontologically *parallel* to the actual world.”²⁹² Fiction, in this account, is an all-or-nothing operation: any deviation from the actual world marks it as a fictional and thus entirely distinct world. It should be clear by now that this does not accord with how Victorian critics discussed the worlds of fictional texts.

The full consequences of this view become evident when we consider historical figures in fictional texts. Such figures have been a regular concern for twentieth-century philosophers of fiction and language; they particularly focus on Napoleon’s role in *War and Peace*. The possible-worlds approach demands that we consider the Napoleon represented in this text as distinct from

²⁸⁹ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 18.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁹¹ Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 12.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 92.

the real Napoleon—rather, he is a fictionalized Napoleon who is identical in many respects to the historical Napoleon. Marie-Laure Ryan, for instance, explaining readers’ *feeling* that the Napoleon of the novel is the real Napoleon, reads him as the “counterpart” to the historical Napoleon.²⁹³ Such counterparts as Napoleon are projected by readers through the principle of “minimal departure,” which says that readers construe the world of the text as “conforming as far as possible to our representation of [the actual world]. We will project upon these worlds everything we know about reality, and we will make only the adjustments dictated by the text.”²⁹⁴ What is suggested here is that there are two different worlds—the fictional and the actual—whose appearance of identity or similarity is in fact projected upon them by readers. The relationship between the Napoleon of *War and Peace* and the historical Napoleon is not identity but *similarity*; they are different beings, and those areas in which they overlap are either explicitly mentioned by the text or assumed by the readers. Within the fictional world or the text, by this argument, Napoleon and Natasha have identical status. Although Napoleon has a real-world counterpart and Natasha does not (she is Tolstoy’s invention), once we “enter” the fictional world, they have the same status—“real” from within in the fictional world, or fictional when judged from the real world. In this approach, unlike the Victorian approach, there is no logical difference within the fiction between a statement by the author/narrator about Napoleon and a statement by the author/narrator about Natasha.²⁹⁵

For Ryan, the role of assumption/projection in counterpart relations is one of the key differences between fiction and nonfiction.²⁹⁶ In counterfactuals (that is, possible worlds that are

²⁹³ Ryan, *Possible Worlds*, 52.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁹⁶ Ryan, *Possible Worlds*, 60.

not fictional worlds), we assume certain forms of identity between names and selves. When a speaker uses a first-person pronoun in reporting a counterfactual or a dream (“If I were a man, I’d be bald,” for instance), we assume the speaker refers to him- or herself. This is not the case for fiction, since when a fictional narration uses a first-person pronoun, argues Ryan, we do not assume the “I” refers to the author unless directed to do so.²⁹⁷ We assume Tolstoy’s Napoleon is a counterpart of the historical Napoleon because there are cues directing us to do so; we do not assume that Orwell’s Napoleon, in *Animal Farm*, is the counterpart of the historical Napoleon because there are no such cues.²⁹⁸

Although possible worlds theory is ostensibly a universal theory of fiction, one that applies to fiction as a concept and not solely the fiction of a particular era or group, Ryan’s account of these assumptions and the role of fictional framing does not seem to have applied to Victorian critics; for one thing, critics almost always *did* assume that the narrator was the author (as in the “I” of the narrator of *Middlemarch*) unless clearly directed *not* to (as in the “I” of a character-narrator, like Jane Eyre). This basic distinction between fiction and nonfiction does not apply to the Victorian context. Moreover, readers did not, as a matter of course, imagine the fictional world produced by the text to be one entirely independent from the real world. Such an independent, discrete world may indeed rest upon the illusion of being independent of a particular, living author. But Victorian fiction was produced by an author who was held responsible for that fiction. Victorian historical novelists did not imagine that the historical personas they wrote about were counterparts to the real figures. This is why they generally strove to avoid inaccuracies in their representations of historical figures—precisely because they were

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ We might say that Orwell’s Napoleon alludes to but does not refer to the real Napoleon.

at risk of “misrepresenting.” The boundary between fiction and nonfiction is open not only to authors harming fictional beings but to potentially “fictional” representations harming real people and the real world.

While the possible worlds approach partakes in the binarizing tendency that characterizes modern approaches to fictionality, it does offer many benefits to fictional theory. For Ryan, one of the foremost scholars of possible worlds as a theoretical model for fiction, possible worlds theory is attractive because it seems to describe how readers actually relate to fictional worlds, unlike a strictly textual approach to fiction (which can scarcely be considered a *theory of fiction*). “Once we become immersed in a fiction,” Ryan suggests in a familiar claim, “the characters become real for us, and the world they live in momentarily takes the place of the actual world.”²⁹⁹ A re-centered fictional world—one that has its own modalities, its own possible worlds—allows for that “pseudoreality” that lets readers empathize with characters:

Would we hope for an outcome favorable to our favorite characters, would we worry that the villain’s schemes might succeed and the hero be defeated, would at least some of us be terrorized by horror stories and moved to tears by romance, if we regarded characters—as structuralists used to do—as a mere collections of textually defined features?³⁰⁰

While possible worlds theory thus tends to normalize invested emotional responses to fiction, it also normalizes the illusion of fiction. Fictional worlds theory seems, though in some interpretations more than others, to account for readers’ intuitive sense that characters have an existence somewhere, but it runs into greater difficulty when asked to account for the coexistence of this intuitive belief with the knowledge of the artifactuality of fiction.

²⁹⁹ Ryan, *Possible Worlds*, 21.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

Although this is a common account of the experience of fiction, it is but one way of describing that experience, and accounts of indignant reading suggest the limitations of such a description as the basis of a theory of fiction. Rather than the illusion of fiction resting on the strongest possible imitation of reality, the textuality or artifice of characters does not necessarily break their emotional hold on readers. It rests on the firm ontological distinction between fictional characters and real people; and while indignant reading does not, I argue, suggest that fictional characters are ontologically identical to real people, it does demand a more porous relationship between the two. Indignant reading suggests that they must be understood as connected.

Cognitive Theories of Fiction

While twentieth-century approaches to fiction tend to result in paradox and contradiction, twenty-first-century fictional theory has the opportunity to continue along these lines or inaugurate a new perspective. Cognitive approaches to literary studies take emotional responses to fiction as normative, going even farther than possible worlds approaches in interpreting such responses as one of the fundamental issues of fictionality. Nonetheless, cognitive approaches also often invoke the illusion of fiction and the illusion of fictional autonomy.

Cognitive approaches to fiction frequently rely on or explicitly theorize a model of fictive experience as “immersive” or “absorptive,” as Merja Polvinen has pointed out. The model of immersion leads seamlessly to the idea that the fictive experience is interrupted or cancelled out by moments when readers are made aware of the fictionality of the text. Immersion and self-reflexivity are thus mutually exclusive, as Ryan has suggested: “Literary texts can thus be either self-reflexive or immersive, or they can alternate between these two stances through a game of in

and out...but they cannot offer both experiences at the same time.”³⁰¹ As only one point of rebuttal, Polvinen points out that some forms of metafiction “weave self-awareness together with the immersive qualities of, for example, realist writing, and present the self-reflection as a continuation of, rather than a break with, the emotional tone generated by fictional world.”³⁰²

Polvinen argues that

this view of immersion and verisimilitude in the cognitive approaches has relied on a partial view of fictional representation, and... it has not been successful in addressing the way in which engaging with a work of fiction—however life-like—is still a coupling of mind with a crafted construct evoking unreal worlds, events and beings.³⁰³

Cognitive literary approaches (she includes psychological approaches) tend to understand fiction as “*imaginative* representation” and consequently focus on the nature of the imaginative action.

Polvinen also points out that Ryan’s claim is a consequence of her metaphor of physical space. The metaphor of the “world,” one which people often use without considering what implications it may carry, and one which I use above, does indeed suggest that one cannot be in two worlds at once. If we imagine fiction as creating a distinct world, Ryan’s point seems intuitively accurate: one cannot be both inside and outside a world at the same time. The problem of metaphor and language in theories of fiction is by no means unique to Ryan. Many of the common metaphors we use in the twenty-first century to describe reading and other fictive experiences embed us in, and reflect our embeddedness in, the paradoxes and illusions that characterize the modern approach to fiction. For instance, the metaphor of being “lost” in a

³⁰¹ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 284.

³⁰² Merja Polvinen, “Being Played: Mimesis, Fictionality, and Emotional Engagement,” in *Rethinking Mimesis: Concepts and Practices of Literary Representation*, ed. Saija Isomaa et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 93.

³⁰³ Ibid., 92.

book—a phrase that has itself inspired at least one study of the purported experience³⁰⁴—suggests a binary of absorption and self-awareness. We lose ourselves in the fiction; reflexivity, or other reminders that the book is only a book, helps readers “find” themselves in the real world.

Similarly, Gerrig and Rapp, in their analysis of the psychological process of responding to fictional texts, take as a given the idea of fiction as a form of transportation to another world. The justification for this assumption is that “readers often describe literary experiences by invoking some version of the metaphor of *being transported*.”³⁰⁵ Gerrig and Rapp explicitly note that this experience seems to isolate the reader from the real world.³⁰⁶ Ultimately, they argue that readers participate in what they call “the willing construction of disbelief”: “people must engage in effortful processing to disbelieve the information they encounter in literary narratives.”³⁰⁷ Gerrig and Rapp also describe the work of Green and Brock, who in 2000 developed a measure of narrative transportation, asking subjects to respond to statements like, “I could easily picture the events in [the narrative] taking place” and “While I was reading the narrative, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind.”³⁰⁸ I do not mean to suggest, of course, that the metaphors of transportation, worlds, or being lost are insignificant or without value. In many ways, these are useful metaphors, and there is absolutely value in testing their psychological

³⁰⁴ See, for instance, Victor Nell’s *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading For Pleasure* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

³⁰⁵ Richard J. Gerrig and David N. Rapp, “Psychological Processes Underlying Literary Impact,” *Poetics Today* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 267.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 268.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

implications. But these geographical metaphors should *not* constitute the only model of fictive experience.

One important set of cognitive literary theorists focus on social cognition and emotions with and toward fictional characters—for instance, Blakey Vermeule’s *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* Such theorists tend to suggest that empathy for characters entails an instinctive or automatic belief in the existence of that character, and the determination or realization that characters are *not* real is a secondary process.³⁰⁹ The same model of experience is invoked in Theory of Mind approaches to fictional beings (or “theory theory”), exemplified by Lisa Zunshine’s work; the reading of fictional minds occurs instinctively by hijacking the instincts and methods used to interpret the behavior of real people in the real world. As Polvinen emphasizes, such approaches tend to obscure the self-reflective aspects of the experience of fiction and “lose sight of mimesis as crafted representation.”³¹⁰ They have the familiar implication that fictionality must be forgotten or ignored for fiction to function as it usually does.

“Cognitive literary studies,” argues Polvinen, “tend focus on how fictions are like reality, or are treated like reality, instead of building on the fact that fictionality itself is part of our everyday life....”³¹¹ In her account, fictionality—which is to say, awareness of fictional status—is a central part of literary imagination, rather than “an obstacle that needs to be overcome before engagement is possible, or an invisible layer that we only become aware of with special effort.”³¹² She proposes that we consider fictionality as a form of “play” in which the reader is

³⁰⁹ Polvinen, 99.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 100.

³¹¹ Ibid., 102.

³¹² Ibid., 93.

played.³¹³ There are two senses of “being played” involved: readers are like the audience of a magician, being tricked but aware of the trick, and readers are like instruments, allowing themselves to be “played” by the text.³¹⁴ In such a model, “even acute awareness of the fictionality of fiction does not constitute an anomalous rational action that works against an emotional immersion—instead it is a natural extension of the dual action of mimesis that is necessary for the immersion to happen in the first place.”³¹⁵

Other cognitive scholars are also beginning to offer models that resolve some of these problems. For instance, Shaun Nichols proposes a “single-code hypothesis,” in which fictional representations are distinguished from beliefs in terms of function but not content. In other words, “pretense” (Nichols considers fictional representations in the category of pretense representations) and “beliefs” constitute two distinct cognitive categories, but they belong to the same mental code and the same systems of inference and affective response may apply equally to both.³¹⁶ The application of such a hypothesis to the paradox of fiction and emotion should be clear: we respond to fictions as if they were real because our brains treat pretense and belief with the same systems.³¹⁷ This also has the benefit of explaining some of the indignant responses described in previous chapters: our normal inferential systems are applied to the behavior of fictional characters as well as to the logic and causality of fictional events, so readers are able to object just as they would to behavior or events in the real world that did not make sense to them.

³¹³ Ibid., 106.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 106.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 106-107.

³¹⁶ Shaun Nichols, “Imagining and Believing: The Promise of a Single Code,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Culture* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2004), 131.

³¹⁷ Nichols, “Imagining and Believing,” 133.

At the same time, because of the different functional architecture, as Nichols explains, imaginary representations and beliefs (imagining that *p* and believing that *p*) can have different consequences because they involve different kinds of desires.³¹⁸ After all, people often have different responses to imagined events than to real events—a phenomenon that Nichols calls “discrepant affect.”³¹⁹ Nichols thus argues that our different desires about the real and imaginary can influence the inferences and memories elicited by the real and imaginary.³²⁰ We have different but equally real desires about the real and the imaginary: we don’t want real meth dealers to prevail over law enforcement, but when it comes to *Breaking Bad*’s Walter White, we very well may root for him and his ruthless climb to the top. Moreover, as Nichols points out, our real desires about imaginary representations may be in conflict: “When watching *Othello*, I both want it to be the case (fictionally, of course) that Othello not kill Desdemona, and I also want it to be the case that the narrative be tragic,” which entails Othello killing Desdemona.³²¹ Our desires about imagined representations, Nichols suggests, are much more flexible and variable than our desires about reality. These desires affect the input and elaboration of our real and imagined representations, and thus the inferential mechanisms that apply to both produce different outputs.

While Nichols’ single-code hypothesis may raise as many questions as it answers—about the nature of these desires, about the implications of conflicting desires for imagined representations, about the possible differences between fiction, pretense, and imagination, about

³¹⁸ Shaun Nichols, “Just the Imagination: Why Imagining Doesn’t Behave Like Believing,” *Mind & Language* 21, no. 4 (September 2006): 459.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 464.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 469.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 471.

the role of any specific text in this process, and so on—it does represent an attempt to expand the array of responses through which fiction should be theorized.

Conclusion

Polvinen's argument is part of a series of recent (within the last fifteen years) accounts of fictionality that take fictionality as something that does not need to be either forgotten or ignored to experience fiction itself, in which "immersion" and "reflexivity" can coexist. Richard Walsh's theory of fictionality, for instance, resolves some of the problems I have identified by considering fictionality as rhetorical and pragmatic, rather than ontological—that is, as a rhetorical resource rather than "a quality of the discursive product (a fictional representation) or a quality of the discursive act (a non-serious or otherwise framed assertion)."³²² In this model, the idea of truthfulness is entirely irrelevant to fictionality; instead, Walsh focuses on the idea of relevance. To view fiction in terms of relevance means that inferences can proceed from "false" utterances just as they do from true ones; this theory, significantly, resembles the single-code hypothesis.³²³ While the accounts of fictionality I have rehearsed above insist, to some degree, on a separation or detachment of fictions and fictional texts from the real world, Walsh's model of fictionality as communicative resource does not: "Fictionality is neither a boundary between worlds, nor a frame dissociating the author from the discourse, but a contextual assumption by

³²² Richard Walsh, *A Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), 1.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 30.

the reader, prompted by the manifest information that the authorial discourse is offered as a fiction.”³²⁴

Such scholars are re-discovering the Victorian approach to fictionality while theorizing it in an entirely modern way. But while Polvinen concludes that we must allow for paradox, I would argue that the general trend of the modern approach to fiction—whether deeply philosophical or moderately informal—is to view fiction in general, and indignant reading in particular, as somehow paradoxical. That we are unable to talk about certain kinds of fictional response, some of which continue to be ubiquitous, without invoking contradiction or paradox, is seriously problematic. Modern fictional discourse consistently suggests that indignant reading, as well as similar responses constituted by awareness of fictionality, is an aberrational response.

As I will show in the following chapter, such responses remain quite common and do not *feel* contradictory or paradoxical. For the Victorians, there was no paradox anywhere in sight. If we are unable to theorize indignant reading as a normative function of reading, the problem is with the language available to discuss fictionality and emotional response, not with indignant reading itself.

³²⁴ Ibid., 36.

Chapter Four:

Reading Indignantly After the Victorians

Maggie Tulliver, of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, is an indignant reader.

“Take back your *Corinne*,” said Maggie... “I’m determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor, and Minna and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones....”³²⁵

She refuses to finish Madame de Stael's *Corinne* because she knows that Corinne's case is hopeless, her misery certain, due to extra-literary forces beyond either Corinne's or Maggie's control. The fictional Maggie is in good company, surrounded by critics, authors, and ordinary readers who are not only likely to understand her impulse, but to express similar ones, in response to Corinne, Rebecca, Flora, Minna, and Maggie herself, in published volumes and authoritative reviews.

While Maggie's response is legible to the modern reader, such a reader would articulate her indignation within a very different critical ecology. A search for *Corinne* in the MLA International Bibliography, arguably the venue of the most authoritative forms of literary analysis, reveals articles on *Corinne*'s relationship to German politics, the theories of Agamben, theories of melancholy, travel literature. There are no articles complaining of Corinne's ill-treatment and wishing the novel had ended more happily; certainly, there are none going on to suggest that their authors would prefer the blonde heroine if she were the forsaken one. An MLA search does, however, identify articles with language that seems distant from Maggie's but that

³²⁵ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 333.

may have their origins in almost identical indignation: articles that examine *Corinne* (and Corinne) in relation to other tragic heroines, or examine the ideological forces shaping the romance plot that victimizes both Maggie and Corinne, and many that read *Corinne* in a feminist light.

For the expression of Maggie's indignation in her own terms—the personal and the affective—we must look somewhere distinctly non-authoritative: fan communities. Just as Maggie insisted that she cared for the dark women “because I always care the most about the unhappy people... if the blond girl were forsaken, I should like her best,”³²⁶ a sizeable chunk of *Harry Potter* fans enacted an affect-based defense of the students of Slytherin House at Hogwarts. “You know guys,” writes one anonymous fan on a discussion page devoted to the final novel of the series, “was I the only one ever riled up by the fact that Slytherin was always portrayed as the ‘evil’ house?”³²⁷ Another responds:

Why is it that ALL the Gryffs [Gryffindors] aside from Petigrew [sic] have so much that makes up for them that everyone forgets their wrongdoings and never once calls them out on it yet all the partially good Slyths get so many other evil qualities heaped on them that it is very hard not to dislike them? I see the logic here; it antagonizes Slytherin. That is one of the few things I always genuinely hated about the universe.³²⁸

And finally, another fan answers Maggie's wish for a story to “restore the balance,” though with respect to *Harry Potter*, not *Corinne*:

Maybe one should go and check out FF.net [fanfiction.net, a fanfiction archive]. Though of course it only displays an opinion, it is very, very easy to find a fic in which a

³²⁶ Eliot, 333.

³²⁷ “Headscratchers: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* Slytherin House,” TVTropes, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Headscratchers/HarryPotterAndTheDeathlyHallowsSlytherinHouse>.

³²⁸ Ibid.

minimum of one Slyth turns good or at least grey. Seemingly we are not the only ones to wish the Snakes [Slytherins] had gotten better treatment....³²⁹

These readers differ from Maggie Tulliver in many ways; indeed, in the terms I have laid out in previous chapters, these fans are objecting largely to an issue of characterization, while Maggie is objecting to an issue of plot. But like Maggie, they express their response through the discourse of personal affect—what they feel, what they like—combined with the discourse of justice.

Fan fiction and fan criticism, on the one hand, and as we shall see, feminist criticism and feminist transformative fiction on the other, are exemplary modes of post-Victorian indignant reading, taking two different evolutionary paths in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Indignant reading centers on the relationship between authors and their characters; readers intervene in the form of aesthetic, ethical, and affective critique, which, in the nineteenth century, was engaged in by lay readers and professional critics alike. In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these modes are split apart.

Feminist transformative fiction carries to its full potential the ethical and political implications of indignant reading that had, in the nineteenth century, remained local, and tends to reduce, relatively, the affective and aesthetic aspects. On the grounds of its ethical and political importance, rather than on aesthetic grounds, this kind of feminist criticism and fiction authorized one form of indignant reading in the academy. As I will suggest, the politicization of indignant reading and its academic authorization depends on a reduction of the role of individual characters and, to a lesser extent, individual authors.

³²⁹ Ibid.

Fans lead with affect, and character is at the heart of the fannish mode of reading and creation. This connection should not come as a surprise. What might be more surprising is the extent to which fans engage with issues of authorial power, control, and authority. The issue I'm emphasizing here is less a legal question—though the legal aspect is relevant when it comes to fan-produced artwork—than a creative or interpretive question. What fans really struggle with is not the *right* to do things with other authors' creations but *the boundaries* of authorial creation and fan invention. Ultimately, fans are highly skeptical of the artistic integrity of authors and creators. The issue is not that authors are irrelevant; the issue is that authors consistently fail.

What the twentieth-century fate of indignant reading suggests is some of the implicit relationships submerged in indignant reading, or what they are forced to become in the ecology of reception and criticism in the late twentieth century. Augmenting the ethical at the (seeming) expense of the affective, feminist indignant reading reduces the role of character as human being. Fan indignant reading foregrounds the affective and emphasizes the importance of character. One important implication here, though, is that the two axes I have identified are not parallel. Though character seems aligned with affect, author is not aligned with ethical; fans' affective interest in character leads to a greater interest in the role and responsibility of the author than is evinced by feminist critics.

We might consider the differences here to be a difference of orientation—one away from the fictional world and toward the real world, and one toward the fictional world. Consider, for instance, different ways of approaching the device of the time-turner in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, a magical device that allows one to travel back in time. A literary critic might consider the thematic or symbolic significance of this device: how does it intervene in the theme of personal responsibility that pervades the novels? A fan is more likely to consider the

various plot possibilities it opens and the ways in which the text succeeds or fails in optimizing them: how far back can it go? Why don't they use it to kill Voldemort? Why don't they use it to save Sirius Black?³³⁰ In other words, fans attempt to complete (and critique) the fictional world, while literary critics attend not to the world but to the text and how it relates to the real world. This is a distinction that would perhaps have seemed unnecessary to Victorian indignant readers but that emerges quite clearly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Feminist Re-Visions: The Politics of Indignant Reading

When Maggie Tulliver indignantly refused to finish *Corinne*, she connected Corinne to other ill-fated heroines: Rebecca, Flora, Minna. Corinne, Maggie implied, is not *just* Corinne; she's part of a group of wronged female characters. Justice to Corinne, one might argue, cannot be achieved through a sequel like the one Thackeray wrote to *Ivanhoe*, in which Rebecca finally got her man; justice can only be achieved by recognizing (and ameliorating) the *injustice* of a literary tradition, not just a text.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the desire to avenge wronged fictional women became part of a political, critical, and aesthetic movement, most prominently represented by the "re-vision" called for by Adrienne Rich, but also figured by Judith Fetterley's "resistant reading" and Annette Kolodny's "revisionary re-reading," as well as a notable increase in certain forms of feminist fiction. Adrienne Rich's "re-vision" was first described in her 1971 essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," originally an invited talk given at the conference of the

³³⁰ This example was related to me by a colleague at the 2013 conference of the Northeast Modern Language Association in Boston, MA.

Modern Language Association on the topic of “The Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century.”³³¹ Rich suggested that a new look at the literary tradition was necessary for the further development of the modern woman writer, and that this new look must entail a recognition of the ways in which women were victimized by it. Women writers, according to Rich, “need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us”³³²; she has in mind the young woman who turns to literature for guidance and meets only “the image of Woman in books written by men... a terror and a dream.”³³³ Hence the need for “re-vision”: “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.”³³⁴ Rich insists that re-vision has moral and political urgency; it is “more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival” and “part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.”³³⁵ In this sense, Maggie’s rejection of the familiar dynamics of dark and light ladies can be seen as not only a personal rejection of a single text but a refusal to participate in the “self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” and, indeed, an attempted act of survival. The fact that Maggie herself eventually participates in such a dynamic—becoming the dark-haired femme fatale with a tragic fate to her cousin Lucy’s blond though melancholy triumph—suggests just how damaging these patriarchal literary conventions are.

³³¹ Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1979), 33.

³³² *Ibid.*, 35.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 39.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

Rich's call came at—and was part of—a transitional moment in the academy. In the previous chapter, I described how the center of critical authority moved from the literary reviewer, the man (and occasionally woman) of letters, to the university, as English literature became increasingly disciplinized in the university. While critics were advocating the study of English literature in the university as early as 1870, professors and critics remained public men addressing general readers. Within the following fifty years, however, the discipline of English professionalized, and literary criticism became a language of specialists. Brian McCrea, in *Addison and Steele are Dead: The English Department, its Canon, and the Professionalization of Literary Criticism*, has argued that one of the guiding factors in the development of twentieth-century literary criticism has been the continuing need to justify the existence of literary experts. This is what it means to be professionalized: “To survive, to flourish, a professional group must establish its autonomy, must, as it were, set itself apart from amateurs in the same field.... Functional specificity makes a profession autonomous, but also pushes it on the verge of irrelevance for any larger public.”³³⁶

The pre-professional generations of critics and professors dealt with “public matters,” like character, reputation, “greatness,” and the life of the author, and they addressed themselves to a wide public, using no special critical vocabulary.³³⁷ But it eventually became clear to advocates and professors of university English that to survive and flourish, it needed to justify and distinguish itself from other fields, to focus on what is uniquely “literary” and thus ignore other factors, like history, ethics, or emotion.³³⁸ Literature needed to be defended as an

³³⁶ Brian McCrea, *Addison and Steele are Dead: The English Department, Its Canon, and the Professionalization of Literary Studies* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 161.

³³⁷ Ibid. While today's literary critics sometimes publish essays in highbrow but general publications, like *The New Yorker* or *The London Review of Books*, careers are not built on this practice.

³³⁸ McCrea, 183.

independent branch of learning. This phenomenon can clearly be observed in the foundational tenets of the new criticism. And thus the material that made up much of the typical Victorian literary review—including the character criticism castigated by L.C. Knights, as discussed in the previous chapter—no longer belonged to what was now defined as literary criticism.

Rich's call for re-vision, echoed by a number of other feminist critics, was part of an opening up of the academy and the canon to alternative perspectives: the perspectives of women, of people of color, of queer-identified people. This was professedly the reason why Rich was invited to speak—to discuss the *woman* writer, to bring in this “new” perspective to the central seat of the academy. If women have been excluded from the literary tradition as writers, Rich insists that they have also been excluded from the literary tradition as *readers*, and the traditions and conventions of creating limited, sexist female characters have played a crucial role in that exclusion. And thus the victimization of female characters is correlated with the victimization of actual women; this is how something like indignant reading can be part of academia. Female characters can matter insofar as they relate to real, existent women—readers and writers—and affect can matter insofar as it is an ethical or political affect.

As Annette Kolodny suggests in “Dancing Through the Minefield,” the different forms of feminist literary criticism are united by a combination of attention and concern: attention to “the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance,” and, what is more relevant to my own points here, concern for the implications of that encoding for women “as characters, as readers, and as writers.”³³⁹ Moreover, what these forms of feminist literary criticism entail is the bringing together of aesthetic and ethical concerns. Feminist critics must “raise difficult and profoundly perplexing questions about the

³³⁹ Annette Kolodny, “Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism,” *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 20.

ethical implications of our otherwise unquestioned aesthetic pleasures.”³⁴⁰ In other words, “aesthetic response is once more invested with epistemological, ethical, and moral concerns.”³⁴¹ This is, in many ways, a return to the Victorian mode of novel reviewing, in which the aesthetic was often indistinguishable from the ethical, though usually these reviewers’ ethical concerns were somewhat different from the ethical concerns Kolodny likely has in mind. Nonetheless, one of Kolodny’s examples would not be entirely out of place in *Blackwood’s*: “it is, after all, an imposition of high order to ask the viewer to attend to Ophelia’s suffering in a scene where, before, he’d always so comfortably kept his eye fixed firmly on Hamlet.”³⁴² While perhaps Victorian critics’ intense respect for Shakespeare makes this particular example unlikely, they regularly and indignantly attended to the suffering of less prominent characters when it seemed unethically excessive, when the suffering of a background character, for instance, was clearly only there to aid a main character, as I discuss in Chapter One. That is, indignant reading as it was practiced by Victorian critics asked for an ethical balance, like Maggie Tulliver, *and* like Kolodny and Rich.

Less than a decade later, Judith Fetterley put forth a related concept in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. This work is in part a response to Rich’s call for re-vision, agreeing that “to avoid drowning in this drench of assumptions we must learn to re-read.”³⁴³ The problem with the “tradition” or the “canon”—Fetterley specifically addresses the American literary tradition—is not only that it asks the female reader to perform a kind of

³⁴⁰ Kolodny, 7.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 16.

³⁴² Ibid., 7.

³⁴³ Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), viii.

psychic dissociation in which she assents to and participates in this limited view of women. As Fetterley puts it, “the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself.”³⁴⁴ To read, for instance, *The Great Gatsby*, as it asks to be read, is to accept that women are not people but symbols within the field of male experience.³⁴⁵ In fact, Fetterley refers specifically to the “dark ladies” of literature for whom Maggie Tulliver feels such pity: “The mystique that often surrounds the dark ladies derives from the fact that they constitute a class of social/sexual/economic outcasts whom men can afford to romanticize and ultimately idealize precisely because they are doomed.”³⁴⁶ In this light, Maggie’s desire to avenge “the dark unhappy ones” can perhaps be understood as the desire to rescue them from symbolism and return them to personhood; here too Victorian indignant reading is continuous with feminist critical reading in its resistance to the *use* of some characters for the gain of others, its aesthetic and ethical objections to lesser characters becoming mere devices.

Re-vision is also a creative practice, which Peter Widdowson has categorized as “re-visionary fiction”: the act of ‘re-writing’ past fictional texts in order to defamiliarize them and the ways in which they have been conventionally read within the cultural structures of patriarchal and imperial/colonial dominance.”³⁴⁷ His analysis focuses on distinguishing this sub-genre, this creative strategy, from other forms of intertextuality:

³⁴⁴ Fetterley, xii.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 96-97.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 92.

³⁴⁷ Peter Widdowson, “‘Writing Back’: Contemporary Re-Visionary Fiction,” *Textual Practice* 20, no. 3 (September 2006): 497.

its aim is to take an historical text which carries a burden of cultural authority and to bring into view both the features of it which have *made* it canonic and those discourses in it suppressed or obscured by historically naturalizing readings. The contemporary version attempts, as it were, to replace the pre-text with itself, at once to negate the pre-text's cultural power and to 'correct' the way we read it in the present.³⁴⁸

Widdowson emphasizes the ways in which re-visionary fiction allows for a dialogue between past and present, borrowing Salman Rushdie's language of "writing back" (as in "the Empire writes back to the Center"). Readers of canonical texts no longer have to be passive recipients, as their readerly resistance can be put into practice as writerly agency, producing a "two-way correspondence in which the recipient *answers* or *replies* to – even *answers back to* – the version of things as originally delineated. In other words, it represents a challenge to any writing that purports to be 'telling things as they really are,' and which has been believed and admired over time for doing exactly that."³⁴⁹

"The first act of the feminist critic," writes Fetterley, "must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us."³⁵⁰ Indignation, I argue, should be understood as an act of resistance, if not necessarily a feminist one. Moreover, the feminist act of resistance should be understood as *indignant*. Critics like Rich, Fetterley, and many others took seriously, and made theoretically and critically valuable, the indignation, anger, or affront women readers have long felt in approaching male-dominated texts that suppress women's voices, perspectives, and experiences. Literary authors—those in dialogue with theory and criticism—are authorized in

³⁴⁸ Widdowson, 501.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Fetterley, xxii.

reading *against* texts by their political position, and in performing those readings as works of criticism or fiction.

But we should not absorb feminist criticism, particularly feminist re-vision, into the whole of indignant reading without regard for their differences. “Indignation” might seem like a petty term for these political turns in literary criticism, and in many ways, the indignant readings I discuss in earlier chapters might seem like petty forms of disagreement with authorial choices. “Indignation” is a fascinating affect for precisely this reason—its ability to describe the trivial frustration of a child noting the basic “injustice” in the fact that her brother is allowed to stay up later than she does *and* to describe the awareness of having been systematically victimized for one’s entire life. Moreover, indignation, and anger more generally, is one of those affects that marginalized people, especially women, are often culturally forbidden from expressing. Feminists of the 1960s and 1970s had to reclaim anger and indignation as part of the act of deconstructing the angel in the house. As Rich puts it in “Writing as Re-vision,” “Until recently this female anger and this furious awareness of the Man’s power over her were not available materials to the female poet, who tended to write of Love as the source of her suffering, and to view that victimization by Love as an almost inevitable fate.”³⁵¹

The purpose of bringing together indignant reading and feminist re-vision is to recognize the continuity between the two, and to suggest that indignant reading as a nineteenth-century critical practice may be one of the historical sources or origins of the practice of feminist re-vision (even as feminist re-vision has helped me to theorize indignant reading). Indignant reading as Victorian critical practice offers a view of the text in which authors can victimize their own characters. In this sense, we can read re-vision and feminist reading and writing practices not

³⁵¹ Rich, 36.

only as adjacent to indignant reading but also evolving out of it. Some forms of indignant reading are identical to re-visionary reading, but in other contexts and other instances, they are very different. What determines the relationship between indignant reading and re-visionary reading is the role of particularity—the role of particular characters and particular plots. Indignant reading is centered on an affective bond with a specific character; re-visionary reading and writing *may* be but need not be.

Wide Sargasso Sea, in this framework, is a crucial instance of an indignant reading that is also a re-visionary reading. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966, is a prequel and parallel novel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, adopting the perspective of Brontë's madwoman in the attic, Bertha Mason, and describing her life in the West Indies prior to and during her marriage to Rochester. Rhys claims to identify Bertha's true name as Antoinette Cosway; "Bertha" is the name given to her by Rochester in an attempt to control and reduce her West Indian identity. Rhys thus anticipates Adrienne Rich's claim in her essay on re-vision that "the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative" and that a feminist, radical critique of literature must "begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh."³⁵²

In telling Antoinette's "side of the story," the novel rectifies the injustice it identifies—that the madwoman not only had no side but was not really a person. As Rhys explained in a letter, "[Bertha is] necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry—*offstage*. For me (and for you I hope) she must be right *on stage*.... She [Bertha] seemed such a poor ghost, I thought I'd like to write her a life."³⁵³ Returning personhood to

³⁵² Rich, 35.

³⁵³ Jean Rhys to Selva Vaz Dias, April 9, 1956, *The Letters of Jean Rhys*, ed. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly (New York: Viking, 1984), 156.

Bertha/Antoinette becomes a question of representation; in representing her fully, Rhys achieves the vengeance—the justice—that Maggie Tulliver wished to see.

In addition to centering her novel on Bertha/Antoinette, Rhys has explicitly framed her project in terms of Brontë's own potential animus against her character. In interpreting Brontë's dislike of Bertha as a dislike of a racial group,³⁵⁴ Rhys' indignant reading becomes politicized.

I was convinced that Charlotte Brontë must have had something against the West Indies and I was angry about it. Otherwise, why did she take a West Indian for that horrible lunatic, that really dreadful creature? I hadn't really formulated the idea of vindicating the mad woman in a novel but when I was rediscovered I was encouraged to do so.³⁵⁵

Rhys' act of "vindication," then, targets both the specific fictional instance of "the mad woman" and West Indians in general. This is the intersection, I would argue, of indignant reading with the various forms of political and ethical re-readings launched in the 1960s and 1970s. The axis of indignant reading is an individual character, who may or may not stand in for larger categories of identity; re-visionary readings rotate around identity groups, who may or may not be represented in a particular fictional character. But the distinction here is not always clearly demarcated, nor should it be. Re-visionary reading may begin in the specifics of indignant reading before swelling to become a politics.

Consider again Maggie Tulliver; her indignation begins in a specific text, Madame de Stael's *Corinne*, and it begins with a defense of a specific character, Corinne. She then expands it outward to Rebecca and Flora and Minna and "all the rest of the dark unhappy ones." She is moving from indignant reading to (almost) re-visionary reading, by connecting the instance to a pattern, to an identity category. Arguably, however, the individual should not be forgotten, and

³⁵⁴ For a nuanced take on Brontë's understanding and use of the slave trade, see Julia Sun-Joo Lee, *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁵⁵ Interview with Hannah Carter, *Guardian*, August 8, 1968, in Helen Nebeker, *Jean Rhys: Woman in Passage* (Montreal: Eden Press Women's Publication, 1981), 126.

the strategies of reading that give voice to neglected characters remain useful precisely because part of vindicating an identity group from oppression and failures of representation is emphasizing the individuality, the humanity, of members of that group. According to Rhys, Bertha is just a vague West Indian for Brontë, and part of the crime that Brontë commits is refusing her a voice and refusing her a specific identity, in saying that white men and white women have individual personalities but the madwoman does not. In this sense, the act of vindicating West Indians and the act of vindicating the madwoman in the attic *must* be joined together; she must be given not only a voice but a specific voice. In this sense, indignant reading's focus on the specific instance, the lone fictional character, is not a reduction of revisionary reading but a crucial part of its politics.

Another important factor in Rhys' indignant reading is that she attributes Bertha's mistreatment to Charlotte Brontë, as a particular individual. Fetterley, in contrast, offers a very different understanding of authorial responsibility in *The Resisting Reader*. When Fetterley suggests, citing Keats, that "the major works of American fiction constitute a series of designs on the female reader,"³⁵⁶ what is the source or origin of these designs? To what or whom does the assenting reader assent? Fetterley is not a reader-response theorist; rather than address this issue, she does what many do and vaguely anthropomorphizes the text(s). For instance, she suggests that there is a hostility toward Catherine "at the heart of *A Farewell to Arms*" without identifying the source of this hostility.³⁵⁷ Fetterley likely does not wish to enter into a debate about authorial intention, let alone a debate about the misogyny of any particular author, and indeed her argument does not hinge on Hemingway or Fitzgerald being a misogynist. But I raise this point

³⁵⁶ Fetterley, xi.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 67.

because one potential distinction between re-visionary reading and indignant reading hinges on the role of the author. The indignant readers I have examined so far all explicitly hold the author responsible for the mistreatment of the characters for whom they feel indignant. Fetterley resists this personalizing move in a post-intentional fallacy, post-biographical criticism era, and yet there's clearly a sense of animus, of design, even if it's the unconscious or implicit misogyny of any male writer of the early twentieth century. This untheorized source can be attributed not only to the critical danger-zone of intentionality but also to the sense that what is being objected to is not the malevolence of an individual but the misogyny of a culture. Fitzgerald alone is not responsible for the dehumanization of Daisy—a literary tradition and the culture that produced and canonized that tradition are. Fetterley's position on the author is more representative than Rhys's. Rhys's commentary on Brontë's personal motives is not, as far as I know, echoed by other re-visionary writers.³⁵⁸ So here too in the politicization of indignant reading, we see an enlargement of scale, away from the individual.

The enlargement of scale that characterizes re-visionary re-reading may proceed until it is all but unrecognizable as a form of indignant reading. Re-visionary re-writings can take different forms, some of which may target not particular authors or texts but narrative or linguistic structures. They may not take the perspective of a particular character who needs rescue or vindication but offer a *new* perspective. Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Writing Beyond the Ending* characterizes the range of strategies authors might use to perform re-vision or to take ownership of the literary tradition in some way. When it comes to previously written texts, writers may use a strategy of "displacement of attention to the other side of the story, or a delegitimation of the

³⁵⁸ One might speculate that the resistance on the part of the Margaret Mitchell estate to the publication of Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* resulted in part from the implication that Mitchell herself was racist.

known tale, a critique even unto sequences and priorities of narrative.”³⁵⁹ Narrative displacement, DuPlessis continues, gives “voice to the muted,” while narrative delegitimation offers realignment that “has always ruptured conventional morality, politics, and narrative.”³⁶⁰

Narrative displacement, with its “committed identification with Otherness,” is all but identical to indignant reading: “This narrative displacement to the ‘other side’ of the story can occur whenever a well-known story is accepted but told from some noncanonical perspective.”³⁶¹ The displacement of the center of a tale from one perspective to another reveals “the implicit politics of narrative”:

the choice of the teller or the perspective will alter its core assumptions and one’s sense of the tale. By putting the female eye, ego, and voice at the center of the tale, displacement asks the kind of questions that certain feminist historians have, in parallel ways, put forth: How do events, selves, and grids for understanding look when viewed by a female subject evaluated in ways she chooses?³⁶²

This idea, DuPlessis notes, is the central premise of a mythopoeic tradition, with origins in the poetry of H.D. (“Eurydice” [1917] and *Trilogy* [1944-46]), Edna St. Vincent Millay (“An Ancient Gesture” [1954]), and Margaret Atwood (“Circe/Mud Poems” [1974]), and more recently, in Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Carol Ann Duffy’s 1999 collection of poems, *The World’s Wife*. Duffy, for instance, re-tells legends, fables, and historical events from the perspective of various women in the case—the hidden perspective that reveals the less-than-legendary truth of the tale. Women, usually passive objects, if not victims, in the traditional versions of the tale, are secretly the scornful agents of much of the action. In “Mrs. Tiresias,” for

³⁵⁹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 108.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 109.

³⁶² Ibid.

instance, the speaker notes caustically that when Tiresias, having become a woman, has his period, doctors are called and he demands “full-paid menstrual leave.”³⁶³ In “Mrs. Darwin,” Darwin’s wife is the inspiration of his theory of evolution when she tells him he reminds her of a chimpanzee.³⁶⁴ One recurrent theme, as we might imagine, is *writing*. Little Red-Cap follows the wolf to find poetry; Shakespeare’s wife, Anne Hathaway, describes their lovemaking in the second best bed as an act of literary composition.³⁶⁵ Changing perspective is largely synonymous with the power to construct one’s own story, tell one’s truth. All of these characters, figures, have sides of the story that have been left out by the “implicit politics of narrative.” The indignant reader identifies this injustice; the ethical writer rectifies it.

In contrast, narrative delegitimation, since it does not center on any particular character, is distinct from indignant reading. There are a number of texts that re-work many of the fundamental women’s narratives without revising any specific texts, as outlined in Gayle Greene’s *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*, which focuses on what she calls women’s metafiction. One crucial example here is Gail Godwin’s *The Odd Woman* (1974). The protagonist, Jane Clifford, is an English professor who is engaged with and resistant to the literary tradition; she rejects “Emma Bovary syndrome”:

literature’s graveyard [is] positively choked with women who... “get in trouble” (commit adultery, have sex without marriage; *think* of committing adultery, or having sex without marriage) and thus, according to the literary convention of the time, must die.³⁶⁶

³⁶³ Carol Ann Duffy, *The World’s Wife* (London: Picador, 1999), 16.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁶⁶ Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 12.

Jane has a Maggie Tulliver-like indignation, focused not on a particular character but on a tradition of representing women. Similarly, *The Odd Woman* refers to a number of literary works, many of them Victorian (most explicitly, Gissing's *The Odd Women*) but is not strictly revising or responding to one specific text.

If narrative delegitimation enlarges the scale of narrative displacement, the next step of enlargement casts doubt on the politics of narrative displacement. Some critics object to texts that use narrative displacement because in only changing perspective or plot, such texts retain other traces of the tradition they wish to leave behind. As Suzanne Leonard points out,

Those skeptical of feminist fiction point to its apparently naïve belief in the transparency of experience, its unwillingness to move characters from personal understandings to social or political activism, and its authors sometimes public refusals to consider themselves or their fictions as part of a larger feminist movement.³⁶⁷

The re-visionary writings that I have identified as similar to indignant reading, from this perspective, think neither big enough nor politically enough. Similarly, other feminist critics remained uncertain whether writing back to the masters was an optimal strategy. As Showalter argues in 1979's "Towards a Feminist Poetics," to focus on these male masters involves "temporal and intellectual investment" in them and may also perpetuate a view of women as victims.³⁶⁸ "From Showalter's perspective, reading the masters, even defensively or antagonistically, is wasted effort and fixes the woman reader in the position of handmaid, anxiously or irately decoding the master's words but still in thrall to them."³⁶⁹ For other forms of

³⁶⁷ Suzanne Leonard, "I Really Must Be an Emma Bovary: Female Literacy and Adultery in Feminist Fiction," *Genders* 51 (2010), http://www.genders.org/g51/g51_leonard.html.

³⁶⁸ Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 130.

³⁶⁹ Mary Eagleton, "Rewriting the Master: Emma Tennant and Robert Louis Stevenson," *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 17, no. 3-4 (July-December 2006): 223.

feminist writings, such as *l'écriture féminine*, breaking out of a patriarchal literary tradition means breaking out of language as we usually conceive of it; these feminist critiques can only barely be connected to indignant reading.

These critiques suggest that the most apparent overlap between indignant reading and feminist criticism was a temporary phase. The enlargement of scale involved in politicizing indignant reading to the point where it could become a critically validated practice continued, until Rhys' animus toward Brontë was unlikely to be replicated, until the rescue or validation of particular characters became ethically suspect.

One implication of this account of the feminist angle on indignant reading is that indignant reading may often occur among lay readers, without anyone taking notice. An indignant vindication of Brontë's St. John does not necessarily have a large audience, or rather, it does not have any larger critical significance as an approach to *Jane Eyre*, at least not on the surface. Vindications of Bertha, however, have implications that extend beyond the indignant reader as an individual. People take notice; the academy takes notice. Perhaps the only ways in which indignant reading can be voiced in a critical, intellectual, and aesthetically sophisticated community is when it has the political and ethical significance of re-visionary reading. But there is one other outlet for indignant reading that has become so large and loud that the academy has begun to notice certain aspects of it: media fandom. There has been a home for indignant readers in virtual (and sometimes material) fan communities.

Indignation and Fan Interpretation

“For fans, they sure do complain a lot.”³⁷⁰

The anger and disappointment of professed fans was the first surprise for the fictional protagonist of *Supernatural*, upon learning that there was a series of books written about him and his brother with a devoted cult following. In this fourth-wall-breaking episode, the writers behind the show were registering their own mixture of fondness and frustration with their vocal fans, who seem to love and hate the show in equal measure—whose love, in fact, takes the *form* of disappointment, anger, and indignation. Because of the intense performances of love and hate, because fans lead with affect, both negative and positive, fandom remains firmly associated with the personal, the private, the uncritical, unlike the feminist reading and writing practices I discuss above. Fandom, after all, is a hobby, not a vocation. The professionalization of one’s fannish activities—as, for instance, when a fanfiction writer becomes a professional writer, or the scholars of fandom who also identify as fans—remains the exception, and most fans zealously guard their anonymity, from the “outside world” if not always from one another. But when we identify fannish reading with indignant reading, we can also identify the critical potential that may be easily veiled by fans’ association with enthusiasm and delusion.

Fans constitute a different kind of interpretive community than do feminist critics, authors, and readers of the kind I discuss above, though, to be sure, many fans identify as feminists and many engage in political critique of media texts. On the one hand, they are more involved in the content of the fictional world than re-visionary readers are; a character matters in and of itself, in addition to significance arising from that character’s gender, race, sexuality, or class, which may raise additional issues for fans. On the other hand, they are often more likely to attribute the problems of the fictional world to a particular agent or set of agents: the author, the

³⁷⁰ “4.18 The Monster at the End of this Book,” *Supernatural* Wiki: A *Supernatural* Canon and Fandom Resource, http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=4.18_The_Monster_at_the_End_of_This_Book&oldid=91222.

writers, the producers, the publishers. The fannish mode of reading, I argue, has an inherent potential for indignant reading that is frequently activated through communal criticism and creative responses, and though it is not a widely respected form of response, it negotiates between pleasure and displeasure, aesthetic critique and ethical critique. In particular, the fannish mode of reading consistently tackles the issues of authority that are downplayed in re-visionary re-reading: the questions of who owns a character, who decides what happens to a character, and who defines the boundaries of a characterization are constantly at stake in fan responses.

But first: what should we consider a “fan”? Fans surely have a long history, as do what we might now call “fan fictions” or “transformative fiction,” which people have been writing for centuries. Fan scholars disagree over when to date the beginnings of fandom, but there were two key shifts predicated on technological advances: the fanzine moment of the mid-to-late twentieth century, in which fans circulated creative works in fan-made nonprofessional and unofficial magazines, and the movement of fandom onto the internet in the 1990s-2000s. It is this latter phase that I am primarily concerned with. In the past twelve years, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, fannish activity has undergone exponential growth, thanks largely to the internet, and, most important for my purposes, fannish trends and rules have expanded and been rigorously archived.

There is a tendency, especially among critics who do not *focus* on fandom, to treat it as either a wonderland of infinite creative possibility or as weird, anti-social, derivative, and aesthetically debased. While I disagree with the latter, it is the former that I’d like to take a moment to argue against.³⁷¹ “Fandom” is an interpretive community comprising smaller

³⁷¹ As Veele Van Steenhuyse has suggested, this free-for-all is one of the implications of Henry Jenkins’ influential use of “textual poaching” to describe fan practices. Steenhuyse, “Jane Austen fan fiction and the situated fantext,” *English Text Construction* 4, no. 2 (2011): 166.

interpretive communities, and like all interpretive communities, it is defined and delimited by rules and hierarchies of value, both implicit and explicit. To be sure, there is nothing stopping anybody from writing (or drawing, vidding, manipulating, or cosplaying³⁷²) anything they want about any existing work of fiction in any media (aside from copyright law, an evolving issue that nevertheless does not significantly affect *most* fan behavior). But fandom as a community is highly self-regulating despite the absence of explicit rules or actual limits or boundaries. These implicit rules, guidelines, and patterns of behavior—not infrequently made explicit as “trends” or “tropes,” though not “rules”—are at the same time always in flux. These regulations are occasionally made explicit in the context of critiques of certain habits or suggestions of “best practices,” in the genres invented to categorize various fictions, and in the fandom encyclopedias/dictionaries that fans frequently produce or contribute to. What I call fannish reading or fannish interpretation is not (necessarily) identical to the reading or interpretation of any individual enthusiastic reader; it is undergirded by a distinct theoretical approach to texts.

Henry Jenkins, one of the foundational critics of fan studies, has suggested that fans combine “fascination and frustration” because the texts they consume “offer the best resources for exploring certain issues” but “never fully conform to audience desires.”³⁷³ This view of fannish indignation explains the genre of fanwork known as the “fix fic” or “fix-it fic,” an attempt to make right that the source text made “wrong.” TVTropes, a popular fan wiki, defines the genre as follows:

³⁷² “Vidding” describes the creation of fan videos, often by editing the existing film (the seven Harry Potter films, for instance) to produce a different narrative, sometimes set to music, and is sometimes also referred to as “filking.” “Maniping” entails the use of image-editing tools to manipulate stills of actors into different images. “Cosplaying” refers to fans dressing up as characters (“costume-play”) in a wide variety of role-playing activities.

³⁷³ Cited in Catherine Driscoll, “One True Pairing: The Romance of Pornography and the Pornography of Romance,” *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: Macfarland & Co., 2006), 86.

Sometimes the fans think that The Powers That Be screwed it. Maybe they've wasted the storyline, or they went for the obvious when a better solution should have been favoured. Maybe they've paired the wrong couple together, or they've derailed the character or they don't even understand who the true hero of the story should be. Or, even worse, they've killed the most important character. Whatever the reason, some fans are dissatisfied and they won't be content to complain about it. They're going address it, in a fanfic.³⁷⁴

The fanfiction, then, would seem to result from the disappointment of the fans; they didn't see what they wanted to see in the source text, so they enact it in a fiction, for other fans to read and experience. A *Harry Potter* fan might write a story in which someone goes back in time (using magic consistent with the *Harry Potter* universe) to prevent, literally, the events that occur in the novel—to prevent the death of Sirius Black, in *Order of the Phoenix*, for example. Under this model of fanfiction, the fictions themselves serve as an outlet for and resolution to fans' indignation insofar as they allow fans to play out what they *wish* had happened. In this sense, Thackeray's *Rebecca and Rowena*, a sequel to *Ivanhoe* discussed in Chapter One, could be considered a “fix-it fic,” allowing Thackeray to explore and resolve his indignation by killing off Rowena and marrying Rebecca to Ivanhoe.

While fix-it fics are important evidence of fannish indignation, but they constitute only a small segment of fan output, which includes both creative work and criticism and discussion. The idea that the texts can never live up to their expectations, while undoubtedly true, does not fully explain the sense of betrayal or violation fans may feel. Disappointment, after all, is not the same as indignation. Fix-it fics, *alongside* other fan works and fan criticism of source texts, are made possible by an underlying struggle with authorial authority. I do not mean to suggest that fans do not acknowledge the authority and power of the original creators of the texts they

³⁷⁴ Each underlined term is, on the website, a link to a page of user-contributed examples and discussion of notable instances of that “trope.” “The Powers That Be” describes those involved in creation and production, those who make the final choices. In future citations from TVTropes, I omit marking the hyperlinks. “Fix Fic,” TVTropes, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FixFic>.

consume; they acknowledge that power but they contest the ways in which it is wielded, and they do so on the grounds of a distinction between what I will call “texts” and “fictional universes.”

Both texts and fictional universes are creations, and neither is “real,” but a text—a book, a film, an issue of a comic book, a television episode—is a particular instantiation of a fictional universe whose larger existence it implies. Such a distinction allows a text to be “wrong” (or perhaps sub-optimal) about the world it ostensibly creates. This makes more sense, perhaps, in the context of serial works. In a single initial text—for instance, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*—the text creates the fictional universe: “Harry Potter” is, basically, no more and no less than what (who) *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* says it is. The fictional universe and the text are all but identical. But *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* expands the fictional universe. The two novels are two texts about a single world, and there is now more obviously room for contradiction and inaccuracy. The two texts say multiple things about Harry Potter, but there are many true statements that *can* be made about Harry Potter that neither text makes.

This distinction, between fictional universe and text, can be understood as a result of what Marie-Laure Ryan calls “the principle of minimal departure,” which is at work even in a single text.³⁷⁵ The principle of minimal departure explains how it is that we are certain that Charles Bovary has two legs even though *Madame Bovary* never specifies how many legs Charles has.³⁷⁶ We “reconstrue” the fictional universe (Ryan calls it the “textual universe,” but the same concept is at stake) “as conforming as far as possible” to the actual world.³⁷⁷ “The gaps

³⁷⁵ Ryan, *Possible Worlds*, 51.

³⁷⁶ Ibid. This is Ryan’s example.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

in the representation of the textual universe are regarded as withdrawn information, and not as ontological deficiencies of this universe itself.”³⁷⁸ Because a text is always incomplete, it is a standard part of any reading practice to supply, imaginatively, necessary information, to contribute to the formation of a fictional universe that is created by the text. The principle of minimal departure is transformed when an author expands or re-writes a pre-existing fiction; in this case, “reality” as the frame of reference for filling in the incomplete text is replaced by the textual universe as the frame of reference. As Ryan explains, “When we read Sherlock Holmes stories written by the son of Conan Doyle, we reconstrue the textual universe as coming as close as possible to the universe of the original Sherlock Holmes stories, which itself is assumed to have been already constructed as coming as close as possible to AW [actual world].”³⁷⁹

Some forms of fanfiction, then, are theoretically not a significant expansion from the usual practices of reading described by fictional theorists. Given this view of fictions and texts, it is easy to imagine an initial impulse toward fan creation and a relatively simple role for that fan creation, continuous with other transformative fiction in the Anglo-American tradition: filling in the gaps, whether it is through sequels (like *Pemberley, or Pride and Prejudice Continues*), prequels (like *Wide Sargasso Sea*), or texts that exist between depicted events without impinging at all upon those events.

The distinction of fannish interpretation arises from the ways in which they understand the authority and stability of the primary text(s). In Ryan’s account, the text and the fictional universe are both created by the author and therefore both authoritative; readerly agency does not

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 53.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 54-55. The fact that the author is Conan Doyle’s son is not as important as the idea that these are “authorized” continuations. Ryan does not pursue the interesting question of how “authorization” is determined by readers.

challenge the texts or textual universe but completes them. In my reading of fan practices, however, the fictional universe is a site of contestation due to the unreliability and vulnerability of individual texts and the individual fallibility of authors. Fanworks do not *only* attempt to complete the textual universe; they offer a huge variety of different and often mutually exclusive textual representations of the fiction. This implies a slightly different theoretical underpinning than that offered by Ryan, who of course is not attempting to explain fandom.

One of the most effective theoretical accounts of fanfiction is Francesca Coppa's "Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance." Coppa's thesis is that fanfiction can be better understood through a dramatic or performative lens than through the textual lens that is usually applied.³⁸⁰ Coppa is invested in this theory as a way of discussing fan fiction's interest in bodies, but her dramatic model also offers a distinct theory of fictional universe and text:

The existence of fan fiction postulates that characters are able to 'walk' not only from one artwork into another, but from one genre into another; fan fiction articulates that characters are neither constructed nor owned, but have, to use Schechner's phrase, a life of their own not dependent on any original 'truth' or 'source.'³⁸¹

The difference between this dramatic model of fiction and a fictional theory based on possible worlds, like Marie-Laure Ryan's, is that the "original" text is in fact not actually "original"; rather, it is simply first. In the theater, Coppa argues, "there's no assumption that the first production will be definitive... we want to see *your* Hamlet and *his* Hamlet and *her* Hamlet; to embody the role is to reinvent it."³⁸² This model may explain the coexistence of so many very

³⁸⁰ Francesca Coppa, "Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, 226.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 230.

³⁸² Ibid., 236.

different fanworks: each one is a performance of a fictional universe. As Coppa explains, “this is no longer a phenomenon within a single author’s control.... Although Rowling may be responsible for putting together an initial series of words in particular order, only in the legal sense is she the ‘author’ of all these other creative productions.”³⁸³ Crucially, the text that originates the textual universe, while important and given greater authority than any individual *fan* text, is also *merely* a performance

In fact, the extent to which these primary texts determine the textual universe/fiction is the underlying subject of a great deal of fan discussion and debate, which can become quite heated. At this point, it becomes important to distinguish between fan criticism and fan creation, which entail different modes of textual interpretation. Fan creation is premised on multiplicity, on the non-contradiction of different performances of the fiction under question. Fan interest in genre and other classification categories arises from the need to mark the ways in which the fiction diverges from the textual universe, a way for the writer to communicate to her readers, “here are the differences you will see and must make allowances for.” These genre categories are organized by romantic orientation and pairing (“gen,” “slash,” “het”), mood (“angst,” “fluff,” “schmoop,” “hurt-comfort,” “crack”), setting (“alternative universe,” “post-*Goblet of Fire*, “pre-series”), and others. Outside these bounds, a reader might critique the fiction for diverging from the communally known textual universe; the extent of this critique varies greatly by fandom and by fanfic community. Additionally, the categories of “canon” and “fanon” help to maintain the distinction between the official fictional universe and fan interpretation. “Canon” refers to the “official” version textual universe as created by the original authors; it is canon that Harry Potter discovered he was a wizard on his eleventh birthday, as described in *Harry Potter and the*

³⁸³ Coppa, 241-242.

Philosopher's Stone. “Fanon” describes “the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext [body of fan creations]. Fanon often creates particular details or character readings even though canon does not fully support it – or, at times, outright contradicts it.”³⁸⁴ Fans are generally aware of the discrepancies between fanon and canon, and not all fans may choose to participate in fanon interpretations or like them, but it is generally recognizable as an alternate version of the fictional universe.³⁸⁵ Such genre categories are what allow individual fan creativity in the midst of a communal understanding of the fictional universe; they actually help police or maintain the boundaries of the official fictional universe.

Even though “fanon” and additional terms, like “head canon” or “personal canon,” help fans hold different versions of the fictional universe at the same time, there is still crucial disagreement over the nature of the actual canon. As Mafalda Stasi puts it,

far from being a fixed and unproblematically shared set of references, [canon] is based on a collective interpretive process.... It is possible to outline a continuum going from quite basic, hard-to-dispute ‘facts’ such as the occupations of the main characters, to highly debatable points of characterization.³⁸⁶

At the same time, despite being a construct “it is regarded as normative by most authors and readers: even when it is turned on its head or flouted, it is hardly escapable.”³⁸⁷ Given the dual nature of canon—both normative and unstable—the heatedness of fan debate is perhaps

³⁸⁴ Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, “Introduction,” *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, 9.

³⁸⁵ The range of ideas named fanon is quite wide. For many, it includes tongue-in-cheek tropes that became popularized, like a certain characterization of Draco Malfoy as a leather-pants-wearing bad boy. Since some fans do not actually engage with the source texts and experience the fandom only through fan works and fan discussion, fanon can be mistaken for canon. See Mafalda Stasi, “The Toy Soldiers from Leeds: The Slash Palimpsest,” *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, 121.

³⁸⁶ Stasi, 120.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

unsurprising, and it becomes most heated in discussion of the source text(s), especially because, as I have suggested, the source text offers only a performance of the textual universe. But unlike fan authors, J. K. Rowling cannot excuse her divergence from “canon” by marking the new novel as “alternative universe” or “OOC” (out of character). The uneasy position of the source text, then, is the source of the fannish indignation; fans become indignant when the continuing source-text or creators seem to contradict or betray the canonical fictional universe.

Consider how this fan declares the limits of what he takes to be canon.

I don't know if you're familiar with how anal fanfic writers can be about what does and doesn't belong in canon? Well, the movies don't count for me (on account of them mostly being SHITE), and no word that JKR says after the fact counts, ESPECIALLY everything she's said after the last book came out. I half wish I could strike books 7, 6 and maybe 5 (and what the hell, how about 4) from the list as well, because though they're spread-your-hands-and-sigh okay, just about every plot point introduced in those books is rushed and unedited and stinky.³⁸⁸

The “half-wish” suggests the complicated status of these texts. The first text—*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*—created the textual universe that it also represented, or performed. The second text continued both the creative work by expanding the pre-existing textual universe and the representative work by offering an additional performance of the textual universe. But it should be clear that there is more room for error by the second performance, a space that just grows larger and larger as the series continues. The dual work that each text performs accounts for comment “empink”'s half-wish; the texts fail, in his/her view, as representations of the textual universe, but the commenter struggles to deny their creative authority.

This is the distinction that is at stake when fans accuse Rowling of having written mere fanfiction for the (poorly received) epilogue to the final Harry Potter novel, *Harry Potter and the*

³⁸⁸ Empink, March 17, 2008 (1:21 PM), comment on Dan Hemmens, “What the Fucking Fuck JK Rowling?” *FerretBrain* (blog), March 17, 2008, http://ferretbrain.com/articles/article-247#comment_743.

Deathly Hallows.³⁸⁹ It may *seem* curious that fans, who create and consume fanfiction (and other fanworks) in great quantities, would use their own creations as a pejorative, though in fact fans are generally very conscious of the bad reputation of fanfiction.³⁹⁰ But more importantly, labeling it “fanfiction” means rejecting its ability to add to the textual universe. Fanfictions are performances of the textual universe that *represent* it but do not *create* it (though popular ones may ultimately, with communal agreement, add to fanon); to call Rowling’s epilogue fanfiction is to suggest that it is no more than another performance of the textual universe.

Fans are hard on creators and source texts because the fannish impulse is to maintain the integrity of the fictional universe at the expense of the integrity of the creator(s) (and by extension, his/her source text). By integrity, I mean both logical coherence (avoiding contradiction and maintaining continuity) and emotional, aesthetic, and moral superiority, which is of course highly subjective. At its most extreme level, this need to maintain fictional integrity can become what is known as “fanon discontinuity”:

Fanon Discontinuity is the act of fans mentally writing out certain events in a show's continuity which don't sit well, no matter if it's a single episode, a season-length arc, an entire season or even an entire *series*. If a plot or ending rubs one the wrong way severely enough, fandom can just decide that the offending events never happened. On the series level, events may fall under Discontinuity because the show is perceived to suck at that point or decline too far in quality. Events also get "discontinued" for particularly screwing up the characters or setting, and a show that starts to suck will end up screwing things up eventually anyway.³⁹¹

Any individual consumer can choose to disregard whatever he/she wants, as one of the commenters above did; “fanon discontinuity” describes a collective decision among a large

³⁸⁹ “Epilogue? What Epilogue?”, *Fanlore*, last modified October 6, 2010, http://fanlore.org/wiki/Epilogue%3F_What_Epilogue%3F.

³⁹⁰ There is even a genre category based on fanfiction clichés: “badfic.”

³⁹¹ “Fanon Discontinuity,” TVTropes, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FanonDiscontinuity>.

group of fans to do so. What usually helps is if the disagreeable canon in question is of liminal status in some way, like a sequel. On the list of examples of fanon discontinuity, one user has explained why fandom has rejected the *Dune* novels not written by Frank Herbert, the original creator: “It should be noted that the reason why any books not written by Frank Herbert himself are not considered canon is not that the new books suck, but because there are so many blatant contradictions that it doesn't take much logic to assume the new authors are making it up.”³⁹² Of course they're making it up, as was Frank Herbert. But the integrity of the textual universe must be preserved, so the later books are rejected. They may be read, but they do not “count” as contributing toward the expansion of the textual universe; they are no more than fanfiction.

Following the completion of the Harry Potter series, fans had to face a number of potential challenges to the integrity of the fictional universe, in both the epilogue to the final novel and in Rowling's extra-textual assertions about the fate of her characters and world. Their commentary on these texts reveals both the reasons fans might reject the authority of the source text and the ways in which that rejection takes the form of challenging the author herself.

The epilogue to *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is, on the one hand, part of the seven books that constitute the series, but as an epilogue, one that occurs nineteen years after the climactic events of the rest of the book, it is easy to see why readers feel like it can be discounted. Many fans who invested a great deal of time into this textual universe felt the epilogue was a simplification, a reduction of that universe; they rolled their eyes at Harry marrying Ginny, his childhood girlfriend, and naming his children after his parents and his mentors, not to mention Ron and Hermione *also* marrying. Many were likely also annoyed at the

³⁹² “Discontinuity: Literature,” TVTropes, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Discontinuity/Literature>.

way in which the epilogue served to “sink ships,”³⁹³ that is, it seemed to foreclose the possibility of different romantic relationships between characters; given the centrality of “shipping” in fandom, this might be particularly frustrating for fans.³⁹⁴ Fans also reacted negatively to the tonal and aesthetic shift in the epilogue; they called it “cheesy” and simplistic.³⁹⁵ Some rejected certain creative decisions in the epilogue as unfitting with the characters and world, that is, with the fictional universe; they debated whether Harry would “really” have named one of his children after both Dumbledore and Snape (“Albus Severus”), suggesting that Harry would have been angry with one or the other of the men.³⁹⁶ Others argued that regardless of what Harry would have thought of Snape, his redemption, as indicated in the final chapters of the last book and in Harry honoring his son with Snape’s name, was undeserved, and the epilogue should be resisted on those grounds. One user on TVTropes implies that J. K. Rowling gave adult Draco Malfoy a receding hairline to punish him.³⁹⁷ And finally, some considered it a betrayal of the fictional universe that the only details important enough to appear in the epilogue are marriages and children:

I would have preferred a better view of how things have gone since then, like what various characters are up to now, how some of them are dealing with losses or with injuries (like Lavender Brown; did she survive that mauling? Is she okay?) how life has been proceeding since the end of the war, etc.... Who took over the ministry? ... what

³⁹³ Several users pointed this out on “Headscratchers: Harry Potter Epilogue,” TVTropes, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Headscratchers/HarryPotterEpilogue>. See also “Ship Sinking,” TVTropes, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ShipSinking>.

³⁹⁴ Fanfiction writers have found ways around this; while some ignore the epilogue, some re-interpret it to suggest that Harry and Ginny got married and had children but could very well have divorced or have an open marriage, allowing for the possibility of different romantic relationships.

³⁹⁵ “Headscratchers: Harry Potter Epilogue,” TVTropes,” <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Headscratchers/HarryPotterEpilogue>.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

happened to Hogwarts, how George handled his grief, as well as the fates of Neville and Luna, maybe since they didn't involve kids. It wasn't because JKR had no ideas left, for some reason she just didn't consider it important to resolve anything else than the possibility of Harry being married with kids.³⁹⁸

The issue here is not *just* that this commenter wanted to read certain details and was disappointed; rather, the view of the fictional universe that the epilogue implies, by virtue of its attention to some details and not others, is unworthy of what the commenter believes to be the actual fictional universe. This failure to appreciate the fictional universe is attributed to Rowling herself. It should be noted that many fans will defend the epilogue against these charges, explaining why it did not fail the textual universe, but regardless, rejecting the epilogue has created an entire genre of Harry Potter fanfiction, labeled EWE: “Epilogue, What Epilogue?”

Ignoring the epilogue is one way to maintain the integrity of the textual universe; another way is to attack the integrity of the creator. This option emerged more clearly in Harry Potter fandom when it came to Rowling’s extra-textual assertions about the universe. Rowling’s post-series assertion that Dumbledore was gay and had been in love with the evil, Hitler-esque wizard Grindelwald before the beginning of the series was bound to cause an uproar, not only in giving these fans crucial details about the fictional characters and world they are invested in, but also because a huge portion of fans are slash-shippers, meaning that they make a habit of pairing two characters of the same gender romantically, and in general, consider themselves highly queer-friendly.

The response was vocal and mixed. Dan Hemmens, writing for the e-zine *FerretBrain*, represents the angrier contingent: “Okay, fine, whatever you say you stupid, sanctimonious hack. Dumbledore's gay, I'll file that with ‘Harry is a Hero’ and ‘It's all about choices’ under ‘Shit I’ve

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

been told about Harry Potter which is totally unsupported by the text.”³⁹⁹ In other words, Hemmens indignantly resists Rowling’s extra-textual commentary, in this case and in others, which does not accord with his previous understanding of the text or the textual universe. In response to Rowling’s quoted statement that “I didn’t even think it through that way,” Hemmens attacks her artistic integrity:

Excuse me while I rant again. **For fuck's sake JK Rowling it's the entire fucking plot of the seventh fucking book**, what do you mean you didn't think it through you fucking talentless moron. I mean seriously, what does this woman get paid for. You're fucking well **supposed** to think things through particularly if they're, y'know, important.... There is just so much, so very very much, about this line that reveals JK Rowling's weakness as a writer.⁴⁰⁰

Rowling, according to Hemmens, had an ethical duty either to specify characters’ sexuality in the books or not at all, and in doing so after the fact, she is betraying the textual universe, not *despite* being the author but *because* of it. “As it is the idea of Dumbledore having any kind of past at all comes kind of out of left field. The idea of him having a **tragic** past is even more surprising and the idea of him having a tragic past of thwarted homosexual love is **utterly** unsupported by the text.”

One of Hemmens’ commenters, Arthur B., further supports the idea that the issue here is one of artistic *failure*:

A pet theory: Rowling only decided that Dumbledore was gay after she finished writing the series. She was giving a question-and-answer, someone asked about Dumbledore's love life, she was vaguely aware that a lot of internet people would be made very happy if it turned out that one of the HP characters were gay, so she blurted out that Dumbledore was gay and reeled out the Grindlewald [sic] connection as spurious evidence. Pretty much everything she says in that quote strikes me as someone rationalising, improvising,

³⁹⁹ Dan Hemmens, “What the fucking fuck JK Rowling?” *FerretBrain* (blog), March 17, 2008, http://ferretbrain.com/articles/article-247#comment_743. Hemmens distinctly labels this entire piece a “rant.”

⁴⁰⁰ Emphasis in the original, here and throughout my citations of Hemmens.

and retconning, retconning, retconning into the future, essentially making shit up on the spot to try to explain why a) we never saw any sign that Dumbledore was gay in the actual books and b) why Dumbledore being gay is at all important or worth mentioning.⁴⁰¹

“Retcon” refers to “retroactive continuity,” the alteration of facts previously established in canon. There are perhaps ways to create retcons that do not involve artistic failure, but this commenter obviously sees retconning as equivalent to “making shit up on the spot.” Rowling is betraying her previously established textual universe in order to please some imaginary “internet people” and then betraying it further in order to make this seem consistent, to create the illusion that it is not a betrayal at all. Likewise, another commenter bemoans Rowling’s lack of talent:

This is one of the worst things about being a fan of anything written by hacks-- if you wait long enough, they'll rip apart everything that was marginally good about it and scribble all over it with fuckwit pens. I'm not sure when I decided to stop listening to JKR's stupid public announcements, but I'm firmly set on doing that as much as possible now.⁴⁰²

Curiously, part of being a fan is being a fan of things written by “hacks.” This is not a coincidence, I would argue; being a fan often means attributing disappointments to the failure of the creator, rather than accepting an incoherent or unsatisfying fictional universe – hence the “hack” judgment.

Hemmens’ issue is not only that Dumbledore’s homosexuality is unsupported textually; he is also offended by what he sees as Rowling attributing Dumbledore’s moral fallibility to his homosexuality. This is part and parcel of a greater moral failing on Rowling’s part that suffuses the entire series:

⁴⁰¹ Arthur B, March 17, 2008, 11:31 AM, comment on Hemmens, http://ferretbrain.com/articles/article-247#comment_740.

⁴⁰² Empink, March 17, 2008, 1:21 PM, comment on Hemmens, http://ferretbrain.com/articles/article-247#comment_743.

Not only is she too pathetic and cowardly to let her precious, precious heroes show any signs of complexity or make any mistakes that aren't attributed to supernatural compulsion (any scene where Harry acts irrationally is the fragment of Voldemort's soul. The scenes in DH [*Deathly Hallows*] where Ron acts completely rationally are the influence of the Horcrux). Not only that, but Rowling then chooses to declare that the external compulsion which stops Dumbledore from following his otherwise infallible moral compass is **homosexual love**.

The “let” language indicates the understanding of authorship and creativity that underlines this entire approach. The textual universe has greater potential than is realized in Rowling’s individual textual performances of that world, but since each of those performances is also an act of creation and definition, her failings as a creator of texts end up restricting the textual universe. The phrase “chooses to declare” is clearly trying to highlight the arbitrariness of Rowling’s assertion—it comes from her own whim, not from the textual universe.

In the response to Hemmens’ rant, one commenter performs an analysis of genre to account for Rowling’s failures when it comes to sexuality or moral complexity, suggesting that what began as a children’s book pitched to a specific age eventually had to be pitched to a variety of ages. Indeed, the novels develop in maturity and complexity as Harry ages, though ultimately they’re children’s books based in romance and fairy tale. Writes the commenter: “It’s no surprise that boyfriends and girlfriends don’t do much more than kiss and hug, and it’s kind of unreasonable to suggest that Rowling should have made the characters interested in more than that.”⁴⁰³ This point fell largely on deaf ears, at least in this venue; the discussion soon returned to Rowling’s failures, personal and artistic, with one commenter suggesting that Rowling is “cheating”: “It’s like she wants the kudos of being open minded about gay people without actually having to face the fact that being so noticeably in fiction - especially children’s books -

⁴⁰³ Arthur B, March 18, 2008, 2:15 PM, comment on Hemmens, http://ferretbrain.com/articles/article-247#comment_749.

is likely to make her unpopular in a few circles. Have some fucking courage.”⁴⁰⁴ These readers are disappointed in the world of Harry Potter, and since they initially loved it and found themselves increasingly disgruntled, it seems natural and probably easy to blame the author: “for fans, they sure do complain a lot.”

The textual universe is far more important than the creator, who does not have creative control over that textual universe. Fans are very skeptical of “artists.” I suspect that this skepticism comes from an awareness of the bureaucracy and profit motives involved in the entertainment industry. Many of the fans I have cited have referred indignantly to Rowling as someone for whom the money is far important than anything like artistic vision or purpose. Rowling perhaps has more creative control than many other writers, but fans of *Harry Potter* are usually also fans of other media texts, like *Lost*, *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. And as much as they may hold up a few different creators as auteurs (notably, Joss Whedon), they are well aware of the forces obstructing the vision of any one creator: producers, teams of writers with rapid turnover rates, advertisers, parent companies, the need to appeal to casual viewers or other less committed audiences. The perhaps obsessive cataloguing of “tropes” and subgenres allows fans to guide one another and direct their reading choices when it comes to fanfictions, but it also reveals their skepticism toward the artistic integrity of creators, and perhaps toward aesthetics in general, insofar as they allow fans easily to identify the “tricks” the writers use to solve fictional problems or to move the narrative along.

Fan creativity is sometimes understood as a sign or symptom of the long-heralded death of the author. After all, they appropriate works, worlds, characters, plots, and settings with

⁴⁰⁴ Krya-wardog, March 19, 2008, 10:55 AM, comment on Hemmens, http://ferretbrain.com/articles/article-247#comment_753.

seemingly little regard for the author's intentions, wishes, or intellectual property. Stasi likens the fannish model of authorship and production to mythological discourse:

This is the way in which mythology is formed: variant retellings of common legends accumulate to build a shared repertoire from which classical authors borrowed characters, events, and plots, each giving it his own twist, often while referring to each other. Myth making, or mythopoeia, is a way of making and transmitting meaning through collective narrative creation. Although this model of authorship and textual production was taken for granted in premodern times, the deep changes in the way individual authorship and 'originality' are regarded in the modern age have by and large marginalized anonymous collective authorship, writing in a shared universe and using a common repository of legends and myths.⁴⁰⁵

This approach makes a great deal of sense, especially if one focuses exclusively on fan creativity. But while fans ostensibly simply *ignore* the author when it comes to writing fictions, fan art, or fan vids, appropriating the creations for their own artistic purposes, when it comes to fan criticism, the author is not only alive and well but usually an aesthetic failure, for particularly capitalist reasons.

Conclusion

In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries indignant reading is adapted for two very different ends. For feminist critics and writers, indignation is the beginning of a sustained ethical and political critique of literary conventions; for fans, indignation is a means of expressing their disappointment with the profit-seeking creators who cannot do justice to their creations. They are also skeptical of conventions (or "tropes"), occasionally from an ethical or political perspective, but also because they often signify artistic failure.

⁴⁰⁵ Stasi, 124.

While indignant reading has a limited place in the academy, fannish indignation is becoming an increasingly dominant force in arts and entertainment; though fans criticize the mercenary motives of creators, they increasingly exert their own economic power as a group of consumers.⁴⁰⁶ Fan indignation may grow to be a crucial factor in the contemporary arts and entertainment industry, which makes it crucial, I think, to understand their way of “reading.”

In the 1980s, fans of the television show *Cheers* threatened to boycott the show if the writers broke up Sam and Diane, the male and female leads.⁴⁰⁷ More than two hundred years earlier, Lady Bradshaigh had made a similar threat to Samuel Richardson, declaring that she would never finish the novel until Richardson promised her that Clarissa and Lovelace would ultimately wed.⁴⁰⁸ By most metrics, these two sets of respondents are wildly different, responding to wildly different texts, and those responses shaped by and expressed through wildly different cultural contexts. But the concept of indignant reading allows us to identify the commonalities between them: these different sets of readers (audiences) share an understanding of the relationship between authors and characters, and their right, as readers, to intervene in that relationship. Just as we should not simplify the story of Little Nell into the story of obsessively and irrationally emotional readers, so too should we acknowledge the complexity of fans’ responses. Mourners of Little Nell, feminist re-visionaries, Victorian critics, and fans—they are all indignant readers.

⁴⁰⁶ A partial list of successful fan campaigns include campaigns to save or renew the television series *Star Trek*, *Roswell*, *Jericho*, *Quantum Leap*, *Chuck*. The campaign to save the show *Firefly* resulted in the film *Serenity*, and the kickstarter campaign for a film of cult-favorite *Veronica Mars* relied on the economic power of fans. Fans can also change the direction of a television show, as *Alias*, where the character who married the protagonist’s love interest, originally meant to be sympathetic, was turned into a villain to appease fan hatred.

⁴⁰⁷ Brian Raftery, “The Best Show That’s Ever Been: An Oral History of *Cheers*,” *GQ*, <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/movies-and-tv/201210/cheers-oral-history-extended>.

⁴⁰⁸ Belfour [Lady Bradshaigh] to Richardson, 1748, *Correspondence*, 4: 198.

Bibliography

Secondary Sources

Adams, Percy G. *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1983.

Adams, Thomas R. and Nicolas Barker. "A New Model for the Study of the Book." In *The Book History Reader*, edited by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, 47-65. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Altick, Richard. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.

Bleich, David. *Subjective Criticism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1978.

Bowen, John. "Spirit and the Allegorical Child: Little Nell's Mortal Aesthetic." In *Dickens and the Children of Empire*, edited by Wendy S. Jacobsen, 13-28. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. 4th ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Brooks, Peter. *Realist Vision*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

"But He Would Never Do That!" *Pop Culture Has Aids* (blog). March 2, 2010. <http://popculturehasaids.wordpress.com/2010/03/02/528>.

Carroll, Noel. *The Philosophy of Horror; Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Carroll, Noel. *A Philosophy of Mass Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Randall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Chartier, Roger. "Labourers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader." In *The Book History Reader*, edited by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, 87-98. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978.

Currie, Gregory. *The Nature of Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Dannenberg, Hilary. *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.

- Darnton, Robert. "What is the History of Books?" in *The Book History Reader*, edited by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, 9-26. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Davis, Lennard. *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- Dighman, Hugh. Letter to the editor. *New York Times*. January 23, 1988.
<http://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/23/opinion/1-little-nell-rescued-from-oscar-wilde-075588.html>
- Duncan, Ian. *Modern Romance and the Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, and Dickens*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Eagleton, Mary. "Rewriting the Master: Emma Tennant and Robert Louis Stevenson." *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 17, no. 3-4 (July-December 2006): 223-241.
- Ferris, Ina. *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Fetterley, Judith. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Fish, Stanley. "Interpreting the *Variorum*." In *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane P. Tompkins, 164-184. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Flesch, William. *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Flynn, Christopher. *Americans in British Literature 1770-1832: A Breed Apart*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008.
- Ford, George H. *Dickens and His Readers: Aspects of Novel-Criticism Since 1836*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955.
- Franklin, J. Jeffrey. *Serious Play: The Cultural Form of the Nineteenth-Century Realist Novel*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- Gallagher, Catherine. "The Rise of Fictionality." In *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti, 1:336-363. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Gerrig, Richard J. and David N. Rapp, "Psychological Processes Underlying Literary Impact," *Poetics Today* 25:2 (Summer 2004), 265-281.

- Gerrig, Richard J., and David W. Allbritton. "The Construction of Literary Character: A View from Cognitive Psychology." In *Literary Character*, edited by John V. Knapp, 380-391. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993.
- Gibson, Walter. "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers." In *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane P. Tompkins, 1-6. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Glazener, Nancy. *Reading for Realism: The History of a U. S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Goodman, Lesley. "Rebellious Identification, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Arabella." *Narrative* 18:2 (May 2010): 163-178.
- Hellekson, Karen and Kristina Busse, eds. *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*. Jefferson, NC: Macfarland & Co., 2006.
- Holland, Norman N. *5 Readers Reading*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975.
- James, Henry. "The Art of Fiction." *Partial Portraits*. Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1970.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.
- Knights, L. C. *How Many Children Had Lacy Macbeth? An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism*. Cambridge, UK: G. Fraser, Minority Press, 1933.
- Kolodny, Annette. "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism." *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 1-25.
- LaPointe, Adriana. "Little Nell Once More: Absent Fathers in *The Old Curiosity Shop*." *Dickens Studies Annual* 18 (1989): 19-38.
- Leavis, F. R. and Q. D. Leavis. *Dickens the Novelist*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1979.
- Lee, Julia Sun-Joo. *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Leonard, Suzanne. "I Really Must Be an Emma Bovary: Female Literacy and Adultery in Feminist Fiction." *Genders* 51 (2010). http://www.genders.org/g51/g51_leonard.html.
- Levine, Caroline. *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003.

- Levine, George. *The Boundaries of Fiction: Carlyle, Macaulay, Newman*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968.
- Lukacs, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.
- MacPike, Lorelee. "The Old Curiosity Shop: Changing Views of Little Nell, Part II." *Dickens Studies Newsletter* 12 (1981): 70-76.
- Manos, Nikki Lee. Introduction to *Diana of the Crossways* by George Meredith, 7-30. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2001.
- Margolin, Uri. "The Doer and the Deed: Action as a Basis for Characterization in Narrative." *Poetics Today* 7:2 (1986): 205-225.
- McCrea, Brian. *Addison and Steele are Dead: The English Department, Its Canon, and the Professionalization of Literary Studies*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990.
- McKeon, Michael. *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
- McKillop, Alan D. "Wedding Bells for Pamela," *Philological Quarterly* 28 (1949): 323-325.
- Nebeker, Helen. *Jean Rhys: Woman in Passage*. Montreal: Eden Press Women's Publication, 1981.
- Nell, Victor. *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading For Pleasure*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- Nelson, William. *Fact or Fiction: The Dilemma of the Renaissance Storyteller*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973.
- Newsom, Robert. *A Likely Story: Probability and Play in Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988.
- Nichols, Shaun. "Imagining and Believing: The Promise of a Single Code." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Culture* 62.2 (Spring 2004): 129-139.
- Nichols, Shaun. "Just the Imagination: Why Imagining Doesn't Behave Like Believing." *Mind & Language* 21:4 (September 2006): 459-474.
- Palmer, Alan. *Fictional Minds*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.
- Phillips, Mark. "Macaulay, Scott, and the Literary Challenge to Historiography." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50:1 (Jan-Mar, 1989): 117-133.
- Polvinen, Merja. "Being Played: Mimesis, Fictionality and Emotional Engagement." In *Rethinking Mimesis: Concepts and Practices of Literary Representation*, edited by Saija

- Isomaa and Sari Kivistö, 93-110. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.
- Poulet, Georges. "The Phenomenology of Reading." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 1320-1332. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Price, Leah. *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Prince, Gerald. "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee." In *Reader-Response Criticism from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane P. Tompkins, 7-25. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. 2nd ed. Edited by Louis A Wagner. Translated by Laurence Scott. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.
- Quinlan, Michael A. *Poetic Justice in the Drama: The History of an Ethical Principle in Literary Criticism*. Notre Dame: Indiana University Press, 1912.
- Rabinowitz, Peter. "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences." *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (1977): 121-141.
- Radford, Colin. "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?: Part I." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 4 (1975): 67-80.
- Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.
- Raftery, Brian Raftery. "The Best Show That's Ever Been: An Oral History of *Cheers*." *GQ*. October 2012. <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/movies-and-tv/201210/cheers-oral-history-extended>.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, 33-50. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1979.
- Richardson, Brian. *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative*. Newark: University of Delaware, 1997.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London; New York: Methuen, 1983.
- Ronen, Ruth. *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Rosenberg, John D. *Carlyle and the Burden of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

- Russell, Bertrand. "On Denoting," *Mind* 14:56 (Oct. 1905): 479-493.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Selenick, Lawrence. "Little Nell and the Prurience of Sentimentality." *Dickens Studies* 3 (1967): 146-159.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Toward a Feminist Poetics." In *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, 125-143. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.
- Small, Ian. *Conditions for Criticism: Authority, Knowledge, and Literature in the Late Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Spilka, Mark. "Little Nell Revisited." *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters* 45 (1960).
- St. Clair, William. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Steenhuyse, Veele van. "Jane Austen fan fiction and the situated fantext." *English Text Construction* 4, no. 2 (2011): 165-185.
- Su, John J. "'Once I Would Have Gone Back...but Not Any Longer': Nostalgia and Narrative Ethics in *Wide Sargasso Sea*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 157-174.
- Traver, John C. "The Inconclusive Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph: Problems of Poetic Justice, Closure, and Gender." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 20 (1) (Fall 2007): 35-60.
- Vermeule, Blakey. *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.
- Walsh, Richard. *A Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2007.
- Walsh, Richard. "Why We Wept For Little Nell: Character and Emotional Involvement." *Narrative* 5:3 (October 1997): 306-321.
- Warner, Michael. "Uncritical Reading." In *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, edited by Jane Gallop, 13-38. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Weston, Michael. "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?: Part II." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 4 (1975): 81-93.

- White, Hayden. "Interpretation in History." *New Literary History* 4 (Winter 1973): 281-314.
- Widdowson, Peter. "'Writing Back': Contemporary Re-Visionary Fiction." *Textual Practice* 20, no. 3 (September 2006): 491-507.
- Wimsatt, William K. Jr., and Monroe Beardsley. "The Affective Fallacy." In *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 1387-1403. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Yanal, Robert J. *Paradoxes of Fiction and Emotion*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.
- Zunshine, Lisa. *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2006.

Primary Sources

- "4.18 The Monster at the End of this Book." *Supernatural Wiki: A Supernatural Canon and Fandom Resource*.
http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=4.18_The_Monster_at_the_End_of_This_Book&oldid=91222.
- "A Century of Great Poets from 1750 Downwards." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 110, no. 673 (November 1871): 552-576.
- Addison, Joseph and Richard Steele. *The Spectator*. Edited by Donald F. Bond. 5 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.
- Behn, Aphra. *The Works of Aphra Behn*. Edited by Montague Summers. 6 vols. London: William Heinemann, 1915.
- "Bleak House No. I." *Athenaeum* 1271 (March 6, 1852): 270-271.
- Bulwer Lytton, Edward. *Bulwer's Novels*. Edition de Luxe. 32 vols. Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1892.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *The Works of Carlyle*. Edited by H. D. Traill. Centenary Ed. 30 vols. New York: AMS Press, 1969.
- "Charles Dickens." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 77, no. 474 (April 1855): 451-466.
- "Charles Dickens and *David Copperfield*." *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 42, no. 252 (December 1850): 698-710.

- “*Chronicles of Carlingford. Miss Marjoribanks.*” *Athenaeum* 2019 (July 7, 1866): 12-13.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Coleridge’s Miscellaneous Criticism*. Ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936.
- . *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. 16 vols. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- “Critical Notice of New Books. II. *Ivanhoe, A Romance.*” *London Magazine* 1, no. 1 (January 1820): 79-89.
- “Current Literature.” *Illustrated London News* 1255 (April 16, 1864): 375.
- Dallas, Eneas Sweetland. *The Gay Science*. New York: Garland, 1986.
- Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. Edited by Michael Shinagel. 2nd edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*. Edited by Madeline House and Graham Storey. 12 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- . *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*. Ed. K. J. Fielding. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960.
- “Discontinuity: Literature.” TVTropes.
<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Discontinuity/Literature>.
- Duffy, Carol Ann. *The World’s Wife*. London: Picador, 1999.
- “*The Duke’s Children.*” *Examiner* 3775 (June 5, 1880): 699-700.
- “*The Duke’s Children.*” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 49, no. 1285 (June 12, 1880): 767-768.
- Eliot, George. *The Mill on the Floss*. Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1998.
- “*English Men of Letters*, edited by John Morley Coleridge.” *Edinburgh Review* 162, no. 332 (October 1885): 301-351.
- “Epilogue? What Epilogue?” Fanlore. Last modified October 6, 2010.
http://fanlore.org/wiki/Epilogue%3F_What_Epilogue%3F.
- “*Eugene Aram: a Tale.*” *Edinburgh Review* 55, no. 109 (April 1832): 208-219.
- “Fanon Discontinuity.” TVTropes.
<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FanonDiscontinuity>.
- “Fix Fic.” TVTropes. <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FixFic>.

- “*Frank and Andrea; or, Forest Life in the Island of Sardinia.*” *Athenaeum* 1675 (December 3, 1859): 639.
- “George Eliot as Novelist.” *Westminster Review* 54, no. 1 (July 1878): 105-135.
- Godwin, Gail. *The Odd Woman*. New York: Knopf, 1974.
- “Headscratchers: Harry Potter Epilogue.” TVTropes.
<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Headscratchers/HarryPotterEpilogue>.
- Dan Hemmens, “What the Fucking Fuck JK Rowling?” *FerretBrain* (blog). March 17, 2008.
<http://ferretbrain.com/articles/article-247>.
- “Invention and Imagination.” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 56, no. 334 (August 1887): 275-278.
- “*Ivanhoe: a Romance.*” *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* 2, no. 34 (January 8, 1820): 21-24.
- “John.” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 30, no. 783 (October 29, 1870): 570-571.
- Lewes, G. H. “*The Foster Brother; a Tale of the War of Chiozza.*” *Westminster Review* 45, no. 1 (March 1846): 34-55.
- Littledale, Richard F. “New Novels.” *Academy* 216 (June 24, 1876): 604-605.
- M B. “*Leonora Casaloni: A Novel.*” *Contemporary Review* 11 (May 1869): 466-467.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. “*The Romance of History. England.* By Henry Steele.” *Edinburgh Review* 47, no. 94 (May 1828): 331-367.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. *The Works of Lord Macaulay*. Albany Ed. 12 vols. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1898.
- “*Middlemarch, a Story of Provincial Life.*” *The British Quarterly Review* 55 (January 1872): 267.
- “*Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life.*” *The British Quarterly Review* 114 (April 1873): 407-429.
- Mill, John Stuart. “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties.” In *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, 343-365. Vol. 1, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Edited by. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981.
- “*The Mill on the Floss.*” *Examiner* 2733 (June 16, 1860): 372-373.
- Monkhouse, Cosmo. “Two Novels.” *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 59, no. 1534 (March 21, 1885): 389.

“Mrs. Oliphant’s Novels.” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 113, no. 692 (June 1873): 722-739.

“Mr. Trollope’s Last Novel.” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 57, no. 1483 (March 29, 1884): 414-415.

“Mr. Trollope’s *Prime Minister*.” *The Examiner* 3573 (July 22, 1876): 825-826.

Nassau Senior. “*Rob Roy, Tales of my Landlord, 2d Series, (Heart of Mid Lothian), Tales of my Landlord, 3d Series, (Bride of Lammermoor, Montrose), Ivanhoe, Monastery, Abbot, Kenilworth.*” *Quarterly Review* 26, no. 51 (October 1821): 109-148.

“New Edition of Wordsworth’s Poetical Works.” *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country* 6, no. 34 (November 1834): 607-725.

“The New Novels.” *Critic* 15, no. 375 (November 15, 1856): 537-538.

“New—The Crisis. Adapted from ‘La Rencontre’ of Pierre Berton by Rudolf Besier.” *Athenaeum* 4324 (September 10, 1910): 303-304.

“Notice of New Works: *Master Humphrey’s Clock*.” *Metropolitan Magazine* 30, no. 119 (March 1841): 78-79.

“Novels, Novel Readers, and Novel Writers.” *The Scottish Review* (July 1859): 239-251.

“Of Novels Historical and Didactic.” *Bentley’s Miscellany* 46 (July 1859): 42-51.

Oliphant, Margaret. “Novels.” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 102, no. 633 (September 1867): 257-280.

“*Open! Sesame!*” *Athenaeum* 2479 (May 1, 1875): 583-584.

“Our Library Table.” *Athenaeum* 2512 (December 18, 1875): 829-830.

Parkes, Kinton. “The Modern Romantic Ballad.” *New Century Review* 4, no. 21 (September 1898): 176-184.

“*Passages in the Life of Mrs. Margaret Maitland, of Sunnyside.*” *British Quarterly Review* 98 (March 1869): 301-329.

“*Phoebe Junior.*” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 42, no. 1082 (July 22, 1876): 112-113.

Plato. Selections from *The Republic*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 49-80. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

“Recent Novels.” *Examiner* 3568 (June 17, 1876): 688-689.

- “Recent Novels.” *Fraser’s Magazine* 598 (October 1879): 542-563.
- Rhys, Jean. *The Letters of Jean Rhys*. Edited by Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly. New York: Viking, 1984.
- . *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Deutsch, 1966.
- Richardson, Samuel. *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*. Edited by Anna Laetitia Barbauld. 6 vols. London: Printed for Richard Phillips, 1804.
- . *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985.
- Rymer, Thomas. *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*. Ed. Curt A. Zimansky. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956.
- Saintsbury, George. “The Historical Novel. II.—Scott and Dumas.” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 70, no. 419 (September 1894): 321-330.
- . “New Novels.” *Academy* 947 (June 29, 1890): 438-440.
- Scott, Sir Walter. *The Waverley Novels*. Library ed. 28 vols. Boston: S.H. Parker and B.B. Mussey, 1852-3.
- “*The Shaving of Shagpat: an Arabian Entertainment... Mr. Meredith’s novels.*” *Edinburgh Review* 181, no. 371 (January 1895): 33-58.
- “Ship Sinking,” TVTropes. <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ShipSinking>.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. “An Apology for Poetry.” In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, 326-362. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- “Some Historical Novels.” *Time* 13, no. 11 (November 1885): 573-580.
- “The Spirit of Fiction.” *All the Year Round* 18, no. 431 (July 27, 1867): 118-120.
- Stephen, James Fitzjames. “The Relation of Novels to Life.” Vol. 1, *Cambridge Essays*, 148-192. London: John W. Parker and Son, 1855.
- Stuart, Louisa. *The Letters of Lady Louisa Stuart*. Ed. R. Brimley Johnson. London: J. Lane, The Bodley Head, 1926.
- Swinburne, Algernon Charles. *A Note on Charlotte Brontë*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1877.
- Tate, Nahum. *The History of King Lear, Revived With Alterations*. London: 1699.
- Thackeray, William Makepeace. *Rebecca and Rowena*. London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2002.
- Trollope, Anthony. *An Autobiography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Wedgwood, Julia. "Fiction." *Contemporary Review* 50 (December 1886): 897-905.

"*Wheat and Tares.*" *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 13, no. 331 (March 1, 1862): 244-245.

"*White Lies.*" *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 5, no. 119 (February 6, 1858): 138-139.

"Wordsworth's New Poems." *Dublin University Magazine* 5, no. 30 (June 1835): 680-705.

Wyndham, Violet. *The Sphinx and Her Circle: A Biographical Sketch of Ada Levenson, 1862-1933*. London: London, Andre Deutsch Limited, 1963.